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KEATS' VIEW OF POETRY

KEATS' VIEW OF POETRY

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To which is prefixed an Essay on
ENGLISH LITERATURE IN JAPAN

By EDMUND BLUNDEN

Professor in that University from 1924 to 1927

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BOSWELL, playing with the notion of buying St. Kilda, asked Johnson's advice, and remarked : " If you should advise me to go to Japan, I believe I should do it." His Master, however, did not commend that excursion to him, and we are left to our own pleasant speculations on the probable direction of Japanese studies in English literature if Boswell had received marching orders. As history happened, although William Adams " the Pilot " had made his name and ability familiar at the Japanese court in the days of Elizabeth, William Shakespeare's name remained unknown there long after the death of Boswell. The acquaintance of a country, which in several points of importance resembles England, with the literature of England, began within living memory ; for, although seventy-five years have passed since Perry sailed to " locked Japan," yet the difficulty of languages prodigiously dissimilar persisted in delaying the enthusiasm for our authors.

Even now, in spite of all the corrections which science applies to old reckonings of space and time, Japan is a far country ; even now the Japanese scholar of English literature who lives in his rural town between factory-chimney and cherry-tree is frequently gruelled for lack of some book or authority, not to be had there for love or money. The mechanical disadvantages besetting close attention

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to English studies when one lives at that distance from large libraries, and in that unpunctuality of information and bookman's opportunity, must be experienced in order to be comprehended. Critics here have scarcely done justice to a recent work on modern English literature written in Japan by Mr. Sherard Vines, as a great feat of endurance and vigilance on the part of one separated in so many ways from headquarters. What Mr. Vines contrived to do, many Japanese devotees of England in prose and verse also toil for. We realise this insufficiently. We hear that a Japanese student knows his Victorians, but we do not perceive the qualities of spirit which operate towards that accomplishment. There is a deep candour at work here, refusing the dictation of an ancient nationalism and seeking excellence wherever it has sprung up ; there is imagination, throwing out of the road the barriers of strange custom, creed and temperament ; there is affection, accepting the burden of a long education and making unnumbered sacrifices while it strives to win the inward companionship of Congreve or Jane Austen. English literature is fortunate in the regard of the nations. America, Germany, France, Holland, China—to name some examples—have given us a wonderful body of criticism of all types ; we seldom feel the total honour of this, and even fail to catch sight of works on our literary inheritance published abroad, which in their ways have no counterpart from our own exponents. Japan has now a splendid list of zealots in our own field, and it is time that we knew more of them and communicated more eagerly with them.

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It happens that some of our Japanese readers find their way to England month by month. Some of these, again, could give us a better account of our recent novelists or dramatists or poets than we could without preparation give them. They come, as I understand, with the hope of seeing something of the writers whom they have worshipped from afar, and whose meaning and genius they have explored through long hours when we should have been nodding at the Oval or yawning over a race-card. Their shyness—I may claim the freedom to speak of this—prevents them from intruding on us, and even from obtaining of us such hints for the best use of their time in England as we can easily offer. In the end they perhaps return to Japan without having had half a dozen conversations in literary circles, and without more than a passing glimpse of men of letters here. The experience may be the usual one of the sojourner and traveller, wherever he may be; but could not England do better for her friends?

Looking away from London to Tōkyō again, I would resume the topic of English literature in Japan. Undoubtedly the recognition that we are not merely purveyors of commercial articles and slaughterers of pheasants and lions was due very largely to Lafcadio Hearn. I quote the eloquent epitome of his professorship which occurs in a recent essay by the author of the present volume: "Though he was not an academical scholar or critic, his lectures are said to have had a magic power of transforming the lecture room into a fairyland where poets and novelists of olden days and new came and went, and

each of them disclosed to students some hidden corners of their hearts." Perplexed and perplexing in his emotional attitudes, Hearn was constant in his curiosity in English literature, and industrious and copious in the task of revealing its great extent and beautiful varieties. The romantic exuberance which he inspired was presently moderated by the exact and manly discipline of letters practised by John Lawrence, philologist. Since those days the vivid utterances of Robert Nichols, the powerful humanities of Ralph Hodgson, and the critical vigour of Sherard Vines and William Plomer have contributed to the health of English studies in Japan; for my own part, I am proud to think that I gave some support to the desire for our characteristic books, the best choice of editions, and sympathy of reading.

Of the earlier Japanese promoters of English literature, an English historian is yet to be discovered. Men like the Rev. M. Uyemura forty years ago produced magazines, now extremely rare, in which religious purpose was seconded by selections and interpretations of our classics. Mr. Uyemura is gone; I had the honour of seeing him once, and of understanding by his humorous reminiscence and merry eye the great effect that he had in his ministry. After his first labours, a number of poets and essayists expressed their delight in the genius of Byron, Shelley and Keats; Byron seems to have faded considerably from Japanese thought, but the other two are there in increasing brightness. A subsequent deviation from English literature was caused by the discovery of the Russian masters, whose titanic effects and startling

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abyss of life for a time overwhelmed almost everything else. Meanwhile, such intrepid leaders as Bin Uyeda, a master of arts and letters as a whole, Haxon Kuriyagawa, of Kyōto, with similar breadth of appreciation, Sōseki Natsume, the novelist, and Dr. Shōyō Tsubouchi, held their course in the English library, and displayed its solid worth. These men all achieved a lasting honour as re-creators of Japanese literature, into which they brought was at once new and genuine. Dr. Tsubouchi has lived to complete his translation of Shakespeare, and to see the event crowned by the establishment of a Shakespearean Museum in Waseda University, where he founded the English department. I imagine that among many veterans who have made their lives models of patient and unselfish research, he is the Grand Old Man of English studies in Japan.

At the present time, perhaps the dominant character in the study of English is Professor Sanki Ichikawa, of the Imperial University of Tōkyō. His library of books relating to philology was heavily damaged by the earthquake of 1923; the catalogue, extant in print, remains as a monument of his range and observancy. Professor Ichikawa's practical direction of the student's taste and talent is of the first importance; and it would not be easy for a non-philologist to do justice to his fund of languages and literatures. One would hardly be surprised were the Irish Free State to call him in as a director of Gaelic teaching. At the other great Universities, other remarkable scholars and translators are met. The names of Professor Doi in the North and Professor Toyoda in the South mean,

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to me and to thousands of Japanese readers, exact knowledge of and full-toned expression upon the best English thought and fancy. Professor Toyoda on the subject of George Eliot and her times, for instance,—but I must not here venture into details of the work of these men. They send out through their country a series of young teachers rich in the learning, the security and the light of our great writers.

Publications in English are frequent in Japan. There is a newspaper or two—apart from those edited by foreigners—in our language, or, as it is more precisely called, “near-English.” But it is not there that we must look, nor over the shop of the mushroom merchant or newly arrived barber, for our evidence. Let us glance at a bilingual periodical with a wide circulation, “The Study of English.” The number for October, 1928, for instance, was devoted to contemporaries. On the cover is a portrait of my old friend Russell Green, with one of his poems. Inside we find a paper on the Sitwells, “Coterie,” “Art and Letters” and connected subjects. There is a classified list of the newest English books, and a gazette of the most recent occurrences and tendencies in the English literary world; there is an instalment of a History of English Literature, and an anthology of verse from respected journals in Virginia, Chicago, and London. This magazine is read by the general student; a quarterly issued by the English department at the Imperial University, Tōkyō, finds a more advanced audience, and for serious and comprehensive attention to our literature commands comparison with anything that is being produced here. To our loss, many of

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its contributors naturally prefer to use their own language for their essays and notes. The volumes of "Studies in English Literature" now comprise a great quantity of particular information and critical survey.

Some notice, too, is required of the separate works which Japanese authorities on English literature have been undertaking. One publishing house in particular, the Kenkyūsha, has a surprising catalogue of our standard authors, introduced and annotated by those scholars; the interpretative and biographical matter in these is most earnestly compiled and presented. Anthologies of short stories and poems are made with a happy naturalness; one such assembles the verse of this country on evening and night; another garlands the flowers of our poets from hyacinth to forget-me-not. Dictionaries enlivened with quotations from many sources are to be had. As there are writers and publishers with a special faculty for the English subject, so there are booksellers. The shop of Maruzen is, of course, easily the most conspicuous and resourceful, and the latest Galsworthy or Shaw is to be found there. There is a parallel to the Charing Cross Road in Tōkyō, a street of second-hand bookshops with almost as many shelves of English books as of Japanese. In making these slender observations on modern Japanese enterprise in reading, I am far from wishing to juggle an illusion that English is heard in every mouth. There are moments of loneliness and bewilderment when one almost loses the sound of England altogether from that busy complexity of transitions, that meeting of many waters and bubbling surfaces. But when we

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consider in one view all that has been done and is being done in the study of our centuries of literature, and the courageous charities of the men who defy remoteness in perfecting that understanding, we cannot withhold a strong expression of pleasure.

Among those Japanese honourers of the British Muse, circumstances both private and public have given me a particular familiarity with the author of "Keats' View of Poetry." I must leave the reader to form his own estimate of the merits of this essay, but I am confident that the result will be favourable; it is my occasion to say a little of my friend Takeshi Saito in other aspects, that may illustrate the graces of Japanese scholarship in regard to our literature. Professor Saito is known partly as a translator of our poets, and of those poets who might seem most difficult to be translated into a language of utterly contrasting form. Such works as "Saul," "The Hound of Heaven" and "The Song of Honour" with their splendour and their secret have passed into Japanese at his inspiration. "A Song to David" has been investigated and recommended by his careful criticism—the precision of which he partly attributes to his old tutor John Lawrence. He has often pointed out to me possible significances and outlying pieces of prose and verse for which I had been unmethodically looking. One embodiment of his great scope of reading is extant—his "Historical Survey of English Literature, with special reference to the Spirit of the Times." Published in Japanese in 1927, this exemplary handbook has been already several times reprinted.

A glance at the illustrations in it affords some

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notion of the choice library to the making of which Professor Saito has devoted his powers, with his eye on the future of English literature in Japan. One plate is a reproduction of the fourth title-page of the first edition of the "Paradise Lost"; another is a facsimile of pages from the "Lyrical Ballads," with notes in the handwriting of S. T. Coleridge; a third shows us the title-page of "Endymion," 1818. Those books are in the collection of the author. They are mountain-peaks in it, no doubt, as they would be in any library; but Professor Saito has a treasury of books besides that make some of us, who hunt books with awful resolution, ashamed of our unqualified defeat. In this world, one never knows one's neighbour, or what is behind the windows of the house over the way. In London often one would not be much edified by the knowledge. In Ushigome—a ward of Tōkyō—the stranger might stand in the rain or the dust, among the slatternly wooden shops and cabins of laundrymen, saké-vendors, fishmongers, charcoal-dealers and clog-menders, might stand in the hobbling procession of muck-carts and the noise of crowded trams and elementary schools practising Western melody, and think he was "in foreign parts." But, if he turned a corner, and entered one or two of the houses, he would think he was in a dream. At least if he were a scholar he would be at home. There Professor Ichikawa's collection of books (some of them lacking to the British Museum) and Professor Saito's, might remind him that

All places that the eye of Heaven visits
Are to the wise man ports and happy havens.

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He would be able to borrow, and read in the tram later among peeping spectacled students, a seventeenth-century glossary, or an early "Shropshire Lad."

What could he do in return? Many things; but I will not presume to indicate more than a few. The first that occurs to me is that England should give her best of personality and of culture to Japanese education, whether that is done by way of the men who go out to occupy posts in Japan, or in our welcome and appreciation of the men who come here to see where Johnson talked and Shelley sang. It is our duty, too often neglected, to shield these admirable and sensitive dreamers—men of action too when emergency calls—from loneliness and misunderstanding; to assist them in such ways that they do not return to Japan after all without gaining the experience and the literary equipment due to them, generally by close contact with typical English life and achievement, particularly in the matter of meeting bookmen and finding books. This country played her part in the reconstruction of the library at Tōkyō after the earthquake; but still a vast amount remains to be done towards removing the stubborn difficulties which dog the Japanese student hungering for real English books. My meaning may be plainer when I say that these young lovers of Chaucer and Hardy have scarcely ever seen, and not one in a hundred knows how to possess, old books which are here thrown aside with hardly a thought. But, more still, I could wish that we were better informed of the noble labours, modestly planned and unselfishly sustained, which the Japanese scholars have multiplied to the

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glory of English literature, and the advantage of the spirit of man. They are too valuable to be lost in the shadowy distance. The essay that now follows is an opportunity for us to begin "seeing better" one of the most felicitous effects of the English spirit, and a responding grace that could not have been anticipated seventy years ago.

EDMUND BLUNDEN.

BEAUTY AND TRUTH

I

BEAUTY AND TRUTH

1. *Keats and Contemporary Poets*

MOST Romanticists are men of ideas—ideas abstractly conceived about liberty, perfectibility and animate nature, and so forth, all revolutionary to some extent and in one aspect or another. Though they are bitter antagonists of cold understanding, which was highly spoken of in the age of Enlightenment, they believe in reason which is inculcated by Kant as sharply opposed to understanding, propagated by Rousseau with the slogan “Return to Nature,” and promulgated by Godwin under the name of perfectibility. It is reason, they would say, that teaches them men are greater than they think under the manacles of custom that have lain for centuries upon them with a weight “heavy as frost and deep almost as life.” The Romantic Revival may be called a second Renaissance with more interest in the life of thought and less physical activity than the earlier one, but with the same yearning for the infinite expansion of human faculties. Wordsworth and Coleridge, it is true, were too self-centred, Shelley too ethereal, Byron lacking in subtlety, and except Scott all holding a poor opinion of themselves and the world. And yet because of that yearning, Romantics are optimists who discern some gleams

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of an "unseen power" amidst "this dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate," and whose hope is to bring to the world a better state of society in which everybody can enjoy liberty and take delight in what nature and life supply him.

As a Romanticist Keats shared those ideas in many respects with contemporary thinkers. In the spring of 1819, after reading Robertson's *History of America* and Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV* and learning a good deal about both unsophisticated and civilised stages of human life, he remarked that "Man is originally a poor forked creature, subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardships and disquietude of some kind or other."¹ Though he thought evil could never be blotted out from this world, he believed in human progress by slow degrees. In the same letter he says: "The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is 'a vale of tears'² from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven. What a little circumscribed straightened [*sic*] notion: Call the world if you please 'The vale of Soul-making.' " According to Keats, "Soul is distinguished from an Intelligence," by which he means "a spark of divinity" or a manifestation of God in man, and though there may be intelligences in millions, "they are not souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself." To make a soul, that is, "to

¹ To George and Georgiana Keats, 15th April, 1819.

² Keats may here be alluding to a line in Shelley's *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, quoted above.

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possess a bliss peculiar to each one's individual existence," three grand materials, the Intelligence, the human heart and the world must act the one upon the other for a series of years. "I will," Keats goes on to say, "call the *world* a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read—I will call the *human heart* the *horn book* read in that School—and I will call the *Child able to read*, the *Soul* made from that *School* and its *horn book*. Do you not see how necessary a world of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?" This world is a place for tribulation, "a place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways." In summarising this rather crude, but certainly remarkable view of life, which discloses to us Keats' characteristic way of thinking, he says, as if he had not made himself clearly understood, "I began by seeing how man was formed by circumstances—and what are circumstances but touchstones of his heart? and what are touchstones but provings of his heart, but fortifiers or alterers of his nature? and what is his altered nature but his Soul?—and what was his Soul before it came into the world and had these provings and alterations and perfectionings?—An Intelligence without Identity—and how is this Identity to be made? Through the medium of the Heart? and how is the heart to become this Medium but in a world of circumstances?"

When I said "Keats' characteristic way of thinking," I had in my mind his original power of thinking and representing his thoughts in terms of life, his unsophisticated knowledge of human life, and his

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idea of "a grand march of intellect," all of which are very remarkable qualities to be found in a poet only twenty-four years old. He hated theorising, and being easily absorbed in things under his perception he used to think things out for himself direct from his own experience. Consequently his view of life is largely based on his personal experience, and not on the Godwinian theory to which Shelley and young Wordsworth owed a great deal, and Coleridge only in a less degree. To Keats "nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced."¹ Many have original minds, he thought, who, being led away by customs, do not think that memory should not be called knowledge. His was an original mind that formed a view of life out of his own experiences (which is "knowledge") and with little help of a given theory (which is "memory"). "Almost any Man may like the spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel—the points of leaves and twigs on which the spider begins her work are few, and she fills the air with a beautiful circuiting. Man should be content with few points to tip with the fine Web of his Soul and weave a tapestry empyrean full of symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his spiritual wandering, and distinctness for his luxury."² Every man is to form his own idea about life, and each must make his individual journey in it, crossing all the others at numberless points, and yet greeting them all again at the journey's end. And it is noticeable that Keats did not care

¹ To George and Georgiana Keats, 19th March, 1819.

² To J. H. Reynolds, 19th February, 1818.

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to moralise like Wordsworth in his later years, or to preach like Coleridge, or to thunder like Byron, or to cry out the trumpet of a prophecy like Shelley. "Man should not dispute," he goes on to say in the same letter to Reynolds, "or assert but whisper results to his neighbour and thus by every germ of spirit sucking the sap from mould ethereal every human [being] might become great, and Humanity instead of being a wide heath of Furze and Briars with here and there a remote Oak or Pine, would become a grand democracy of Forest Trees!"

It should be noted that here Keats was thinking not only of the development of each individual soul, but also of the progress of civilisation, which he calls "the general and gregarious advance of intellect" or "grand march of intellect."¹ Keats was interested, especially in his later days, in "the incidents in the development of a soul" as much as any Romantic poet was, and, I might say, only in a less degree than Browning himself, who went so far as to add, "little else is worth study." While, with most contemporary and later poets, the mind of Keats was directed inwards, his eye watched the outward world far away out of his soul, and saw there the slow, but steady forward movement of humanity as a whole. This belief in human progress was a rare gift among contemporary poets and thinkers. Of course, Shelley the ardent follower of Godwin was fond of writing about the millennium, but this "impetuous one" could neither tolerate progress by slow steps nor think of life's "many colours" as

¹ To Reynolds, 3rd May, 1818.

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eternity's "white radiance broken," so that he was absorbed in crying down kings and priests in the simple hope that the millennium must come if only those tyrants disappeared from the face of the earth. Moreover, Shelley's idea of the millennium is simple because it was merely a kind of Arcadian paradise. The place where Prometheus, whom Shelley calls "the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends,"¹ retires with his lover after his emancipation, is nothing but

"a simple dwelling
Where we will sit and talk of time and change
As the world ebbs and flows, ourselves unchanged."²

His idea of utopia (cf. *Prometheus Unbound*, Act III, Sc. iv, and *Epipsychidion*, ll, 417-587) is sublimely simple, like

"The loftiest star of unascended heaven
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane."³

In this strange mixture of Arcadian pastoralism and communist anarchism, there is something similar to the old Chinese idea of the earthly paradise. In the age of such a general trend as this, Keats' discernment of a "grand march of intellect" is remarkable. In spite of his hatred of doctrinaires he knew the importance of knowledge. His own knowledge of real men and women is surer than that of Wordsworth and Shelley. The lake poet idealised his dalesmen and, though realising their dignity as

¹ Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*.

² *Prometheus Unbound*, III, iii, 22-24

³ *Prometheus Unbound*, III, iv, 203f.

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human beings, lacked passionate love for individuals, so that his idea of dalesmen is not based on facts, while the revolutionary poet passionately loved humanity as a whole, but not real men and women, and consequently his want of insight into each individual mind is sometimes deplorable. Although Keats can never be said to have known men and women as Dante or Shakespeare knew them, his reading of character is quite remarkable for his generation. There are in his letters many passages which are evidence of his knowledge of personality, for example, those passages about Rice, Reynolds and Richards, and about A, B and C. The contrast between the abstract-minded Shelley and the particular-minded Keats will be perceived from the fact that, while Shelley compares his skylark to "an embodied joy whose race is just begun" and says about Asia, the lover of Prometheus, that "all feel yet see thee never," Keats often speaks of the abstract in terms of the actual sense, as "soft-handed slumber,"¹ "azure-lidded sleep,"² "shady sadness of a vale,"³ "pale and silver silence."⁴ This difference might come from the fact that the elder poet was first essentially a humanitarian idealist and then a poet of "intellectual beauty," whereas the younger, remaining from first to last a poet-lover chiefly of sensuous beauty, was in his last years an idealist-poet, endeavouring to grasp the reality of things, in nature and life.

¹ *Psyche*, ii.

² *The Eve of St. Agnes*, xxx.

³ *Hyperion*, i.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ii. Other examples will be found near the end of this chapter.

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II. "*Sensations Rather Than Thoughts*"

So, this Romantic genius with his original power of thinking and belief in the "grand march of intellect" was at once a great lover of the handiwork of beauty and an idealist seeking after truth.

Towards the end of his life he wrote that he "loved the principle of beauty in all things,"¹ namely, the principle which brings into unity all such objects as are enumerated as things of beauty in the opening lines of *Endymion*. Intensely he loved it. Endymion's exclamation :

"O what a wild and harmonized tune
My spirit struck from all the beautiful!"²

can be taken as his own self-expression. Truly he was convinced that

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever :
Its loveliness increases : it will never
Pass into nothingness,"³

especially if it is a thing of beauty represented in art. When he thinks, on the other hand, of a thing of beauty existing in this actual world, it is a "Beauty that must die," with whom Melancholy dwells. His life-work was to keep the beauty in evanescent matters of this world and enshrine it in his poetry—poetry which is never, with him, a process of consecutive argument, but is an appeal to an intuitive power. Hence Keats' well-known exclamation, "O for a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!"⁴—a wording which is rather misleading.

¹ To Fanny Brawne, February, 1820.

² *Endymion*, III, 170f.

³ *Endymion*, I, 1-3.

⁴ To B. Bailey, 22nd November, 1817.

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Keats was never trained in philosophy, and not only is his terminology for philosophic inquiry so ambiguous that a word is meant now for this and then for that, but it is also sometimes used with much variance from the terminology of well-trained students of philosophy. He did not even try to express himself in a philosophical and systematic way. "I shall never be a reasoner, because I care not to be in the right, when retired from bickering and in a proper philosophical temper."¹ "Let it never be forgotten," as a devoted critic of Keats reminds us, "that 'sensations' contrasted with 'thoughts' mean for Keats not pleasures and experiences of the senses as opposed to those of the mind, but direct intuitions of imagination as opposed to deliberate process of the understanding."² What he wanted first of all was imaginative experience, and not cold argumentation, that is to say, he attached greater importance to a life taking delight in beauty that is felt through imaginative intuition, than to a life hungering after the things attained through logical inference; and naturally the fixed theories and stubborn arguments that "Godwin methodists" held and preached were quite out of tune with such a temperament as this.

The same note is struck in the poem entitled *What the Thrush Said*, 9-14, where the bird R. Browning's "wise thrush" speaks to Keats:

"O fret not after knowledge—I have none,
And yet my song comes native with the warmth.
O fret not after knowledge—I have none,
And yet the Evening listens. He who saddens

¹ To Bailey, 13th May, 1818.

² Sir Sidney Colvin: *Life of John Keats*, p. 266.

KEATS' VIEW OF POETRY

At thought of idleness cannot be idle,
And he's awake who thinks himself asleep."

And here by "knowledge" the poet probably means intellect or understanding in the sense of the Kantian terminology. When he says that the force of his muse is unintellectual, but divine, and asks,

"What sea-bird o'er the sea
Is a philosopher the while he goes
Winging along where the great water throes?"¹

he is rather apologising for his immaturity than making light of philosophy.

Keats was always fully conscious of the importance of experience, which is nothing but the source of the knowledge of life, and readers of his letters cannot fail to be deeply impressed by a great number of characteristically Keatsian passages about wisdom which is rarely attained by a young man like him. He esteemed knowledge so highly that he said the only way of escaping death is to know all the mysteries of the world. In the scroll that Glaucus read there is a passage:

"If he utterly
Scans all the depths of magic, and expounds
The meanings of all motions, shapes and sounds;
If he explores all forms and substances
Straight homeward to their symbol-essences;
He shall not die!"²

Some other passages may be cited from his poetical works before we come to the explicitly personal opinion expressed in his letters. About a fortnight

¹ *Lines to Fanny*, beginning "What can I do to drive away."
15-17.

² *Endymion*, III, 696-701.

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before writing *What the Thrush Said*, he says in his invocation to Apollo, god of Song :

“O let me, let me share
With the hot lyre and thee
The staid Philosophy.”¹

On seeing a lock of Milton’s hair he addresses the blind poet-sage :

“When every childish fashion
Has vanish’d from my rhyme,
Will I, grey-gone in passion,
Leave to an after-time,
Hymning and harmony
Of thee, and of thy works, and of thy life ;
But vain is now the burning and the strife ;
Pangs are in vain, until I grow high-rife
With old Philosophy,
And mad with glimpses of futurity.”

Keats’ poetry suffers much from his lack of sustained reasoning, a defect to be deplored, especially in *Endymion*. If he had had greater reasoning and critical faculties, he could have avoided such defects as the confusion of symbolical meanings, resulting in disjointedness and his not infrequent indulgence in sensuous, almost sensual, delights, which is in striking contrast with the idealistic aspiration of the hero. If his mind had been philosophically trained, *Endymion* might have been “a deed accomplished” instead of “a feverish attempt.”² By the early part of 1818, that is, the time of the composition of those two lyrics quoted above, Keats must have been aware of this almost chronic symptom of his early days. And in consequence of this self-criticism, which is clearly

¹ *A Draught of Sunshine*, 36-38.

² Cf. pp. 80f, *infra*.

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seen in the Preface to *Endymion*, he seems to have prepared himself for the study of philosophy.

This esteem for philosophy becomes a more conspicuous feature in his letters. On 24th April, 1818, he writes to John Taylor in a very humble note, "I know nothing—I have read nothing—and I mean to follow Solomon's directions, 'Get learning—get understanding.' I find earlier days are gone by—I find that I can have no enjoyment in the world but continual drinking of knowledge. I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good to the world. Some do it with their society—some with their wit—some with their benevolence—some with a sort of power conferring pleasure and a good humour on all they meet—and in a thousand ways, all dutiful to the command of great Nature—there is but one way for me. The road lies through application, study, and thought. I will pursue it; and for that end purpose retiring for some years." This passage can be compared with the well-known sentence in Milton's *Reason of Church Government*, Book II, Preface, "By labour and intense study (which I take to be my portion in this life) joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die." Then in about a year's time, Keats prepared himself to ask Hazlitt the best metaphysical road he could take. His thirst for knowledge was so great that he said, "Every department of knowledge we see excellent and calculated towards a great whole—I am so convinced of this that I am glad at not having given away my medical books, which I shall again look over

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to keep alive the little I know thitherwards ; and moreover intend through you and Rice to become a sort of pip-civilian.”¹ Here Keats seems to mean by knowledge neither the mere information of facts nor logic-chopping, but truth, or the grasp of reality. Again he says, “An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people—it takes away the heat and fever : and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery, a thing which I begin to understand a little.”² It will be noted that when he exclaims, “O for a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts ! ” his attention was engrossed to some extent by the contrast between the trained mind of Bailey and the inspired moments in his own poetic life (for his was a mind which, foreign to abstract thought, was easily rapt by an object under his perception). This can be clearly understood when we read the following passage : “The difference of high sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this : in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again, without wings, and with all [the] horror of a bare-shouldered creature—in the former case, our shoulders are fledged, and we go through the same air and space without fear.”³

About a year later he writes to Haydon, “I am three and twenty with little knowledge and middling intellect.”⁴ The remarkable sonnet, “Why did I laugh to-night ? ” was written, he tells his brother and sister-in-law, “with no Agony but that of Ignorance ;

¹ To Reynolds, 3rd May, 1818.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ 8th March, 1819.

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with no thirst of anything but Knowledge when pushed to the point though the first steps to it were through my human passions."¹ What an impatience for deeper knowledge this is, which he thinks is to be obtained through personal experience. He cannot resolve to give up studies, and therefore he thinks it suits him best to "lead a fevrous life alone with Poetry."² To him the composition of poetry is an aspect of learning. He goes so far as to say, "I hope I am a little more of Philosopher than I was, consequently a little less of a versifying Pet-lamb."³

It is hardly necessary to repeat that Keats was by no means blind to the impotence of mere knowledge. Probably he was too much aware of its limitation. After the discussion of the difference between Sensations with and without Knowledge, he goes on to say, "This is running one's rigs on the score of abstracted benefit—when we come to human life and the affections, it is impossible to know how a parallel of breast and head can be drawn; it is impossible to know how far knowledge will console us for the death of a friend, and the ill 'that flesh is heir to.'"⁴ "Axioms in philosophy are not axioms till they are proved upon our pulses. . . . You are sensible no man can set down venery as a bestial or joyless thing until he is sick of it, and therefore all philosophizing on it would be mere wording."⁴ Experience gained from life was what Keats wanted, personal experience and not logical exercise. He made up his mind

¹ 19th March, 1819.

² To Miss Jeffrey, 31st May, 1819.

³ To Miss Jeffrey, 9th June, 1819.

⁴ To Reynolds, 3rd May, 1818.

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“never to take anything for granted—even to examine the truth of the commonest proverbs,”¹ because that is the way for attaining the depth of personal experience.

Still, some critics may stand up and, contradicting what is said above, quote the following passage from *Lamia* (II, 229-38):

“Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel’s wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
The tender-person’s *Lamia* melt into a shade.”

This is certainly perplexing, and “challenges the mind to untimely questionings and reflections.”² But are these lines “but a cheap and unilluminating repetition of a rather superficial idea, fit enough for Lamb to toss as a gibe against Newton in studio talk after supper?”³ No, in spite of such an authority as Sir Sidney Colvin, it seems to me otherwise. The passage in question recalls Wordsworth (*not* Lamb), in whose *Poet’s Epitaph* the logic-chopper is derided:

“Physician art thou? one all eyes,
Philosopher! a fingering slave,
One that would peep and botanise
Upon his mother’s grave.”

It is certainly not a philosopher in the true sense of

¹ To George and Georgiana Keats, 31st December, 1818.

² Sir Sidney Colvin: *Life of John Keats*, p. 408.

³ Sir Sidney Colvin: *Life of John Keats*, p. 408.

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the word, the lover of wisdom, that Keats denounces in *Lamia*, but

"A reasoning, self-sufficing thing,
An intellectual All-in-all."

Notice the two significant epithets in the second line of the passage quoted from *Lamia*. What Keats denounces in Apollonius, the old philosopher, is not his knowledge, but his lack of wonder and of love, that is to say, his cold attitude towards the new wonders created by *Lamia* and the affections of his disciple. Keats was a poet of the "Renascence of Wonder," who disliked "all the stubborn arguers hammering their nail into you, and if you turn the point, still think you wrong"¹ and whom the old philosopher's dull indifference to preternatural happenings since the appearance of *Lamia*, and his blindness to beauty in any sense must have aroused to sharp comment. Even Coleridge, who, now steeped in German metaphysics, ceased to be a poet, seemed to Keats to be one who "would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge."² The poet should not be troubled with "any irritable reaching after fact and reason" if he becomes, on that account, incapable of remaining content with the Renascence of Wonder, which is, in Keats' words, "uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts." A poet, Keats thinks, ought rather to be contented with them because the burden of the mystery is inex-

¹ To George Keats, 24th September, 1819, when the poet was engaged on *Lamia*.

² To G. and T. Keats, 28th December, 1817.

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plicable, than to become either a "Godwin Methodist" or a logical machine.

Though in *Lamia* Lycius is wrong in not consulting with his teacher about his marriage, the philosopher ought to have warned his disciple about his ill-starred love that he might get rid of the witchcraft of the serpent-lady. It is neither kind nor proper that he appears as an uninvited guest and simply curses her. This must have been almost self-evident to Keats, whose main tenets are, love of fellow-creatures and "bearing of naked truths,"¹ and who strives "to uprear Love's standard on the battlements of song."² The central motive of *Lamia* is neither philosophy versus love, nor reason versus pleasure, and in my opinion the poem is to be interpreted as the expression of Keats' conception of the function of poetry, if there is any symbolical meaning in it.³ Lycius is a poet, and *Lamia* his "demon Poesy." The true poet ought not to indulge in a fairyland detached far from real life, unmindful of the cares and miseries of his brethren. Nevertheless, being bewitched by the fair form of his demon-lover, Lycius is content with becoming blind to the reality of life. And like the poet who is haunted by Alastor, the Spirit of Solitude, he seeks after an illusion, which is to be destroyed by the philosopher both with goodwill and the sense of duty. It is neither this goodwill nor the sense of duty, but the lack of wonder and love that brings about the death of the "demon-Poesy," which is, though not absolute Beauty, the

¹ *Hyperion*.

² *Endymion*, II, 40f.

³ *Ode on Indolence*, iii.

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hope and life of the poet for the time being. In connection with this it should be remembered that, though both love and poetry come from the heart, lovers should be wise in their acts for they are actual members of society, while poetry can be "noble untruth" for its realm is imaginary in its essence. Love is *Wahrheit* and poetry *Dichtung*. In the case of poetry illusion can be allowed to some extent. But Apollonius treats of poetry, which is embodied in Lycius and Lamia, with the sheer touch of mechanical understanding. Hence the denunciation of this old man by Keats, whose ardent yearning is "O for a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" After all, "the genius of Poetry cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself."¹

In conclusion, Keats seems to think that though the intellectual element in poetry is a very important factor, it should be closely united with emotion, or else mere knowledge is of no value for poetry.

III. "*Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty*"

Keats is, as is stated in the preceding section, no despiser of true knowledge, that is, grasp of reality, but, on the contrary, he thinks it the attainment of deep life-experience; and absolute poetry is to him, as will be noted later, a representation of life-experience either real or imaginative, such as love of man and nature, written in "potential speech"² by one who bears all naked truths and envisages circumstances with all calmness. Then, it can easily be noticed that there is a great similarity between knowledge and

¹ To J. A. Hessey, 9th October, 1818.

² The meaning of this term will be explained on a later page.

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poetry, or truth and beauty. One may say they are identical so far as reality, which is their essence, is concerned. As these two things, beauty and truth are main features in Keats' ideas, especially in his later years, he needs must be aware of this similarity, and finally makes the declaration,

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."¹

This couplet has been frequently, but never satisfactorily commented by critics, among whom is included Matthew Arnold, one of the ablest and most sympathetic exponents of Keats; he says, "No, it is not all," though he adds, "but it is true, deeply true, and we have deep need to know it."² Still it is all-in-all that artists know, and the most important thing of all that they should know. The word "truth" here, it is to be noted, is used in the sense of reality, and in Keats' opinion, though it is not clearly stated, a thing of absolute beauty is at the same time a thing of reality.³ A similar vein of idea is expressed in the following verse,

"For who has mind to relish, Minos-wise,
The Real of Beauty, free from that dead hue
Sickly imagination and sick pride
Cast upon it!"⁴

¹ *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, v. Finding fault with this couplet some ignorant or careless critics have said it is sententious and not in harmony with the rest of the poem. As the keynote struck in this ode is *ars longa, vita brevis*, or, in other words, the reality and immortality of art in contrast with the appearance and evanescence of life, the last two lines are a very apt conclusion.

² Ward's *English Poets*, IV, 435.

³ The word "reality" is used here in the philosophical sense. Shelley seems to have been of the same opinion as Keats, when he said that "a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth" (*A Defence of Poetry*).

⁴ *Sonnet on Visiting the Tomb of Burns*.

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If the word "truth" is used in the sense of scientific law, we cannot, as a matter of fact, say truth is always beauty. But what is absolutely beautiful must be essential and real, and what is essential and real must be beautiful if adequately expressed.

This interpretation is confirmed by Keats himself. In December, 1817, the month in which he was engaged on *Sleep and Poetry*, he gave us the outline of his conviction immortalised in the couplet in question. Referring to West's *Death on the Pale Horse* he says, "It is a wonderful picture, when West's age is considered; but there is nothing to be intense upon, no women one feels made to kiss, no face swelling into reality."¹ He seems here to speak of reality as the essence of beauty. "The excellence of every art," he goes on to say, "is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth." More convincingly he affirms to Haydon, "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections, and the truth of Imagination. What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth,"² and boldly denounces Wordsworth's *Gipsy* because "it is a kind of sketchy intellectual landscape, not a search after truth."³ In fact, he could "never feel certain of any truth, but from a clear perception of its Beauty."⁴ Lastly, he had "the yearning Passion for the beautiful, connected and made one with the ambition of my intellect."⁵

Though some critics, misled by the abundant

¹ To George and Thomas Keats, 28th December, 1817.

² 22nd November, 1817.

³ To Bailey, November, 1817.

⁴ To G. and G. Keats, 1818-1819.

⁵ *Ibid.*

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sensuousness of Keats' poetry, take the couplet as evidence of his æstheticism, he says nothing in favour of the art-for-art's-sake doctrine, nor is he to be labelled as a precursor of that school. In spite of the re-affirmation by Mr. Arthur Symons, perhaps the last survivor of the art-for-art's-sake poets, on the occasion of the centenary of Keats' death,¹ it is by no means doing him justice to style him an æsthete. It is true that Keats loved sensuous beauty and cared for art more than any other earlier Romantic poet. But this is not sufficient ground for calling him an art-for-art's-sake writer. No poet of that school can declare that his beauty is "a power strong in beauty."² Keats' humanitarian conception of beauty, art and poetry is at variance with the æsthete's hedonistic notion of them. The æsthete is evidently classed as the dreamer by the author of *The Fall of Hyperion*.

"The poet and the dreamer are distinct,
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes."³

Keats' view is art for life's sake, and, it may be truly said, he practised what he preached.

It should be observed that some passages in his letters appear at first glance to be contradictory to this art-for-life's-sake doctrine. But when he says that "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration,"⁴ he is thinking of "sensations" which are of greater importance to poets than "thoughts," and the phrase "the sense of Beauty" is used here in

¹ Cf. *The John Keats Memorial Volume*, pp. 180f.

² *Hyperion*, II, 213.

³ *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 197f.

⁴ To G. and T. Keats, 28th December, 1817.

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no other reference than imagination. There is no evidence of æstheticism in saying that for a great poet imagination is the most important guide of all his faculties. Even in his letter to Shelley Keats is consistent with his humanitarian conviction that a poet is to do good for the world by writing poetry. I grant that when he says there that an artist must serve Mammon, and have "self-concentration" ("selfishness, perhaps," he adds), he looks very like a founder of the school of art-for-art's-sake, and as though he were no more than a mere dreamer-artist who cared nothing for this commonwealth of humanity. But before we consider him in that way, we must give due weight to his condition of irritability, the common lot of those who are condemned to death, and to the character of the poet to whom the letter is addressed. Though the manner of this letter is even rude when considered as an answer to a very kindly-written letter, the Shelley of that time deserves the advice it gives. Keats is, of course, sure that his brother poet is divinely gifted, but is afraid that poetic gift is being wasted on behalf of the Shelleyan theory of "Godwin perfectibility," which the younger poet detested as the empty dream of a doctrinaire. Everybody ought to do good for the world, but everybody's business is nobody's business. Some do it with their deeds, others do it with their art. And there is but one way for a poet.¹ He has to serve humanity in his own way, that is, in writing poetry and, as a poet, in no other way. He ought not to be diverted from revealing beauty and truth in his poems, which is his

¹ Cf. letter to Taylor, 24th April, 1818.

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highest duty to the world. If he is diverted from this and employed in other things, he is not performing his duty to the utmost, however well-intentioned he may be. In this sense he must have "self-concentration," which in its intensity seems, to those who do not know what a poet is, to be nothing but selfishness, but which, in reality, is just the thing he wants, namely, his self-devotion to the cause of good.¹

iv. *Reality and Selflessness*

From Keats' identification of Beauty with Truth (that is, poetry with reality) we come to an important fact which bears on his view of a poet's character. In short, he says that a great poet is selfless, because in his intense imaginative power and ardent desire for reality, he loses himself in the object of his thinking and lives the life of that object. This idea of reality and objectivity is, as we noted above, a thing rarely found in Romantic and subjective poets, and it makes Keats unique among them.

He was by no means blind to Wordsworth's defects, and seems to have given a higher place to the objective poets than to the subjective, whom he called "the Wordsworthian, or egotistical sublime." When he wrote to Woodhouse, 27th October, 1818, about the poetical character, he had in mind only the objective and selfless type of which he was, if he was anything, an example. "It is not self," he says, "—it has no self—It is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives

¹ This point of Keats' humanitarian view of poetry requires a fuller treatment, which will be found in a subsequent chapter.

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in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet." This is a remarkable eulogy of the receptivity of a poet, and can safely be said only about the "myriad-minded" creator of Iago and Imogen. "A poet," Keats goes on to say, "is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity—he is continually in for and filling some other body. The Sun, the Moon, the Sea, and men and women, who are creatures of impulse, are poetical, and have about them an unchangeable attribute; the poet has none, no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's creatures." The poet is the most unobtrusive person because he is selfless. When Keats was "quite disgusted with literary men,"¹ he was tired not only of their jealousy of each other, but also of their conceit, and so when he resolved he would "not run with that most vulgar of all crowds, the literary,"² he wished to stand apart from their mannerisms both in their life and work. To him, what was considered poetical in other writers was just the opposite, and the unpoetical was poetical. In spite of the generally accepted criticism of Keats' style, he was a great admirer of simplicity and disinterestedness, and it is this characteristic that made him hope his mind would be "a thoroughfare for all thoughts, not a select party" because "the only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up

¹ To Bailey, 8th October, 1817.

² To Haydon, 8th March, 1819.

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one's mind about nothing."¹ His was in fact a most receptive mind, so that he was frequently absorbed in the object before his eye, forgetting, for the moment, everything else. "When I am in a room with people," he says, "if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then, not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me, so that I am in a very little time annihilated—not only among men; it would be the same in a nursery of children."² It was so not only in a nursery of children, but also among birds. "If a Sparrow come before my Window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel."³ What he wrote about Kean, the actor, may be said about himself—he "delivers himself up to the instant feeling, without a shadow of a thought about anything else."⁴

This quality of selflessness and receptivity is on another occasion⁵ considered by Keats as freedom. "The poetry of Shakespeare is generally free as is wind—a perfect thing of the elements, winged and sweetly coloured. Poetry must be free. It is of the air, not of the earth; and the higher it soars the nearer it goes to its home. The poetry of *Romeo and Juliet*, of *Hamlet*, of *Macbeth*, is the poetry of Shakespeare's soul—full of love and divine romance. It knows no stop in its delight, but 'goeth where it listeth'—remaining, however, in all men's hearts a perpetual

¹ To George Keats, 24th September, 1819.

² To Richard Woodhouse, 27th October, 1818.

³ To Bailey, 22nd November, 1817.

⁴ On Edmund Kean as a Shakespearean Actor.

⁵ On Edmund Kean in Richard Duke of York.

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and golden dream. The poetry of *Lear*, *Othello*, *Cymbeline*, etc., is the poetry of human passions and affections, made almost ethereal by the power of the poet." Here again it is doubtless not individuality in the proper sense of the word that Keats rejects, but an opinionated and obtrusive mind. He never slighted the soul, which he called "a world of itself, and has enough to do in its own home."¹ He who had so great an interest in the soul of each individual can never be thought to have neglected his own soul.² Freedom from bigotry and one-sidedness is the point that Keats laid stress on.

This selflessness is undoubtedly such an extremely rare gift that Shakespeare *may* be the sole example in the whole history of literature, though even he is not absolutely universal. Apart from that no one can maintain that the Romantic writers were endowed with this rare gift. Wordsworth has a passion for nature, with which he sympathises as if it were animate, but the infusion of himself into any sort of man is beyond his power, unless into a person like himself. Coleridge, for all his sense of the mysteries, cannot transfuse himself into such differing characters as Henry V and Falstaff. Scott lacks idealism and is limited in his characters though he had a greater range of them than any of his contemporaries. Byron's heroes are always Byron Remodelled—Childe Harold, Manfred, Lara, the Corsair, the Giaour and many other dark personages, all being "link'd with one virtue and a thousand crimes." Shelley, the

¹ To Reynolds, 25th August, 1819.

² Cf. Section 1 of this chapter.

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passionate lover of humanity in the abstract sense, is always hovering in his ethereal atmosphere far from actual men and women on earth. It is natural that all these Romanticists are essentially lyric poets (even Scott is in his element when he writes lyrics), and that, when they try long poems, their works are either autobiographies as in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, or expressions of the poet's limited, though extremely profound, taste for the mysterious as in *The Ancient Mariner*, or productions of the author's propensity to the mediæval and chivalric as in *Marmion*, or tempestuous outcries of personal experiences as in *Childe Harold*, or versified opinions of a revolutionist as in *The Revolt of Islam*. When they write in the form of drama, their works are still either lyrical like *Manfred* and *Prometheus Unbound*, or pamphleteering in verse like *Cain* and *Hellas*, *The Cenci* being the only exception that is truly dramatic in the strict sense and mainly impersonal, though too many "lyrical cries" are found even in that solitary glory of the English drama in the early half of the Nineteenth Century.

In such a period as this—a period which is probably the most glorious in the history of the English lyric, and in which every poet is characteristically so subjective and lyrical that he is too self-centred, and consequently none is great in drama or epic,¹ it is a very remarkable and interesting fact that Keats realised the common weakness of contemporary poets and yearned for selflessness, and that he himself had the quality in a much greater degree than any other

¹ A similar statement can probably be made about the Romantic poetry of the Continent.

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Romantic poet. I do not mean that he was so selfless, as he was "continually in for and filling some other body" or, in his words, he had not "any determined character." It can hardly be said of any poet except Shakespeare; and yet it may not be an exaggeration to say that, of all modern poets of the United Kingdom Keats is the most akin to Shakespeare in his flexible and receptive selflessness. With this admirable characteristic in him, it would be a proper thing for him to be ambitious "to make a revolution in modern dramatic writing."¹ If he wrote two or three poems in which the colouring of *St. Agnes' Eve* was diffused throughout and both character and sentiment would be the figures to such drapery—such poems, Keats was entitled to say, "would nerve me up to the writing of a few fine plays—my greatest ambition—when I do feel ambitious."² It was his ardent desire to produce such poems in the course of six years as would be a famous *gradus ad Parnassum altissimum*, but to our endless regret he was then already in the hand of death and fated to die within sixteen months, leaving no play of great achievement. Of his two dramatic attempts, *Otho the Great*, a tragedy in five acts, because of the circumstances in which it was written and of the writer's little skill in stagecraft, is very defective, though there is something of terseness and force about the whole. *King Stephen*, a dramatic fragment, is more promising, in spite of some incongruities and anachronisms, and is marked by fiery energy in martial scenes which is a revelation of one

¹ To Bailey, 15th August, 1819.

² To Taylor, 17th November, 1819.

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of Keats' aspects hidden to us till the composition of this fragment.

In fact, Keats is no dramatist in achievement, but it can be said he was one in promise. This statement may be endorsed when we think of his genius as a narrative poet, displayed in his stories in verse, especially *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Lamia* and *Hyperion*. It is the mark of a narrative poet as well as a dramatist to infuse himself into the character he is treating and be interested as much in actions and events as in feelings and thoughts, which he is to represent not as his own, but as his character's. At a first glance this seems quite easy, but in practice how difficult it is! In the age of reason the poetry of argument and doctrine overshadowed the natural flow of feelings and thoughts, while in the age of the Renascence of Wonder the poetry of the "lyrical cry" excluded the human call to action. Thus Romantic poets, escaping from the old lack of subtlety, are still to be blamed for their half blindness to their own possibilities, which is due to their inclination to subjectivity—at once the weakness and the strength of Romanticists. This weakness is strikingly notable in *Adonais* written by the greatest of the English lyric poets, who was, however, a complete devotee of the Godwinian theory and firmly believed that kings and priests alone made this world something of a hell. Nobody will, or can deny the noble voice of passion in that wonderful elegy; every critic will entirely agree with the author in calling it "a highly-wrought piece of art." But Shelley never distinguishes the character whose death he laments so deeply—a point which has escaped the

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notice of critics. Who is Adonais? Any poetic genius might be Adonais, the hero of the elegy, supposing that savage criticism had produced its violent effect on his susceptible mind, and he had died very young as an inheritor of unfulfilled renown and was buried in a romantic and lonely cemetery in Rome. Where can we recognise any essential characteristics of Keats' personality or poetry in those fifty-five Spenserian stanzas? If we meditate that the best stanzas in this elegy are those in which Shelley gives a self-portrait, I am afraid we may be led to the strange impression that this elegy is written for himself and not for Keats. Shelley is always absorbed in his own ideas, and extremely subtle as he is in understanding others, he has hardly an eye for discernment of character. Another instance of this limitation is famous; he calls Byron "the Pilgrim of Eternity,"¹ a term which is queer grandiloquence when applied to the author of *Childe Harold*, while it is a precise cognomen for Shelley himself. Here again we have an illustration that the Romantic poet, "startled by his own thoughts, looks around"² and always speaks of himself instead of the character in his poetry.

On the other hand, it was Keats' hope to become a selfless poetic character such as he described in his letters, and it remains only a hope though it had a very promising prospect. Though once he wrote to Reynolds,³ "I have nothing to speak of but myself, and what can I say but what I feel?" he probably did not mean either that he was an absolutely lyric poet

¹ *Adonais*, xxx.

² *Alastor*, 296.

³ 25th August, 1819.

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always projecting himself in his works, or that he thought of nothing but himself. The last word *feel* should be dwelt upon. When he speaks of himself he speaks of what he feels, or what occupies his mind and heart for the moment, that is, somebody else he is "in for and filling." This may be clearly understood when we read the passage that precedes the quotation above given, "Those whom I know already, and who have grown as it were a part of myself, I could not do without: but for the rest of mankind, they are much a dream to me as Milton's Hierarchies. I think if I had a free and healthy and lasting organisation of heart, and lungs as strong as an ox's, so as to be able to hear unhurt the shock of extreme thought and sensation without weariness, I could pass my life very nearly alone though it should last eighty years. But I feel my body too weak to support me to the height, I am obliged continually to check myself, and be nothing." Here we find the poet's high-strung temperament and subtle sensitiveness, which might have made him sympathise with all sorts of men and women and consequently would have made them become a part of himself. His was so selfless a character that his endeavour was to check his absorption in others and keep himself apart from that excitement. And with great confidence he says that this state of mind is "the only state for the best sort of Poetry."

Again, we may be puzzled over the following passage in the same letter, "all my thoughts and feelings which are of the selfish nature, home speculations, everyday continue to make me more iron." The explanation

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is that the devotion to poetry, which is everything to him, is the thing that makes him great—great as a man. The same association of poetry is urged in those extravagant words written to Shelley twelve months later, "An artist must serve Mammon; he must have 'self-concentration'—selfishness, perhaps." Otherwise, there could never come his firm conviction that "fine writing is next to fine doing, the top thing in the world."

This "chameleon poet" delights in and is carried away by everything that comes before him as the object of his imagination, but he does not think that the poet is to write with his eye on the object. Confidentially he writes to his brother in America, 18th September, 1819, about a great difference (in his judgment) between Byron and himself: "He describes what he sees—I describe what I imagine." Surely this is an immense difference, and, as Keats says, his is the harder task.¹ His business is to reveal the essence of his object and not to copy his object as it appears.

"Most sweet it is with unuplifted eyes
To pace the ground, if path be there or none,
While a fair region round the traveller lies
Which he forbears again to look upon."

So writes Wordsworth, though he must have had a keen eye on nature, a great help in writing poetry.

¹ When Byron says, "as for Poets, mine is the *dream* of my sleeping passions; when they awake I cannot speak their language" (*Letters and Journals*, ed. by Prothero, Vol. IV, p. 43), and then, "my first impressions are always strong and confused, memory *selects* and reduces them to order" (*Ibid.*, IV, 119), he seems to be contradicting Keats. In fact, Byron's theory, like that of Wordsworth, is that poetry should "take its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." But does he practise his own theory?

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While the Lake poet was sensitive in sight and hearing, Keats was a keen observer of nature in all her aspects. "When a wave was billowing through a tree, he heard the wind coming across woodlands till he would look like a young eagle staring with proud joy."¹ From his early childhood he

"watched intently Nature's gentle doings."²

Watchfulness over nature and life was the habit that concerned him. Still he was never satisfied with merely describing what appealed to his senses. Sensuous beauty is not the word that covers the whole range of his poetic genius. He knew that

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter,"³

which recalls some lines in Wordsworth's *Personal Talk*,

"Sweet melodies
Are those that are by distance made more sweet ;
Whose mind is but the mind of his own eyes,
He is a slave ; the meanest we can meet."

Similarly, when Endymion cannot bear the sight of the splendid palaces of Neptune he shuts his eyes in vain, because

"Imagination gave a dizzier pain."⁴

It is intensity of imagination animated by keen observation of nature and life, and not minute description, that Keats thinks to be of great importance to a poet ;

¹ *Life and Letters of Joseph Severn*, edited by W. Sharp, 1892, pp. 20f. Keats must have actually looked like a young eagle. Benjamin Haydon's portrait drawn in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett, 1844, gives us the same impression. Cf. pp. 118f.

² "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," 63.

³ *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, ii.

⁴ *Endymion*, III, 1009.

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and this faith to a certain degree characterises his poetry. Well he discerns what is a sight to dream of and what a thing to tell. He never insists, in his later works, on minute description, though he is a master of it, and though it becomes a remarkable element in the verse of his followers like the young Tennyson and D. G. Rossetti. Perhaps someone will challenge my claims for Keats, quoting for instance *The Eve of St. Agnes*, stanza xxiv in comparison with *Christabel*, 178-183, and maintaining that the disciple is not above his master. Then let us read those passages one after the other.

“The chamber carved so curiously,
Carved with figures strange and sweet,
All made out of the carver's brain,
For a lady's chamber meet :
The lamp with twofold silver chain
Is fastened to an angel's feet.” (*Coleridge.*)

“A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
All garlanded with carven imag'ries
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings ;
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and
kings.” (*Keats.*)

While Coleridge's wonderful art hides art (self-consciousness can be traced only in the repetition of the word “carved” used together with the word “carver,” very suggestive of the abundance of carvings), Keats is not describing simply what he sees. The simile of “the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd

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wings" is a splendid and gorgeous phrase coming from "the inward eye." Here too, it is Keats' usual method of concentration and suggestion that he tries: the reader is given the means of imagining everything associated with a lady's chamber in mediæval England. "Could all the pomp and grace of aristocracy, with Titian's and Raphael's aid to boot, go beyond the rich religion of this picture, with its 'twilight saints,' and its scutcheons '*blushing* with the blood of queens?'"¹ In Keats' painting, it is true, we cannot find Coleridge's magic power of concentration, because he frankly indulges in exuberance of impression. But it is evident that Keats describes what he imagines, rather than what he sees, because his mind is open to everything and his soul is infused into it.

I say his mind is open to all he feels, and so he is a poet whose art could make every physical sense beautiful. His sensuousness was universal. A passage in *Hyperion* may be cited as an illustration:

"Then, as was wont, his palace-door flew ope
In smoothest silence, save what solemn tubes,
Blown by the serious Zephyrs, gave of sweet
And wandering sounds, slow-breathed melodies;
And like a rose in vermeil tint and shape,
In fragrance soft, and coolness to the eye,
That inlet to severe magnificence
Stood full blown, for the God to enter in."

It is notable that in these lines not only the senses of sound, colour, motion, smell and touch are very aptly expressed, but also one type of sense is qualified by words which are originally used to express or

¹ Leigh Hunt: *Imagination and Fancy*, 1844, p. 335.

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imply another type of sense, for example, "smoothest silence," "wandering sounds," "fragrance soft," "coolness to the eye." It is hardly necessary to dilate upon the richness of Keats' phrases in reference to the senses of the eye and the ear, but it was his gift to be delicate in the senses of fragrance, taste and touch, which are not frequent among English poets, even such great masters as Wordsworth and Shelley lacking in the subtle realisation of the olfactory and the palatal senses. The word "fragrant" and its derivatives recur among favourite words with Keats (for instance, "fragrant zone,"¹ "fragrant boddice,"² "flowers fragrant-eyed,"³). And he has a line,

"The inward fragrance of each other's heart."⁴

which is very interesting to the Japanese, as we have a corresponding idiom "kokoro no kaori" (fragrance of heart) in our everyday language, and the "listening to incense" (kō wo kiku) is regarded among us as one of the accomplishments.

Next, as for the sense of taste, the line about "Lucent syrups tinct with cinnamon," which will be discussed in the third chapter, and the lines,

"Instead of sweets, his ample palate took
Savour of poisonous brass and metal sick."⁵

may be counted among the best evocations of physical taste in English poetry. Lastly, the sense of touch is exquisitely given in such phrases as "unclasps her

¹ *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, v.

² *The Eve of St. Agnes*, xxvi.

³ *Ode to Psyche*, 13. Cf. "embalmed darkness" (*Nightingale*, v).

⁴ *Isabella*, x.

⁵ *Hyperion*, I, 188f. Keats says elsewhere, "The last two years taste like brass upon my palate" (letter to F. Brawne, August, 1820).

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warmed jewels,"¹ or the "silken flanks"² of a heifer, and in such lines as the following :

"Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees."³

"At this, through all his bulk an agony
Crept gradual, from the feet unto the crown,
Like a lithe serpent vast and muscular
Making slow way, with head and neck convuls'd
From over-strained might."⁴

The senses of smell, taste and touch are said to be lower than the visual and the auditory senses, and perhaps this is why poets have neglected them. Keats can be significantly called a poet of sensuous beauty, so long as we are awake to his many subtle allusions to the senses. After reading him, who can declare that those three senses are unworthy of poetry ?

¹ *The Eve of St. Agnes*, xxvi.

² *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, iv.

³ *The Eve of St. Agnes*, xxvi.

⁴ *Hyperion*, I, 259-263.

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II

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I. *Sleep and Poetry*

KEATS, "the man who never stepped in gradual progress like another man,"¹ unfolded the epoch-making powers of his genius during the short space of some five years. As he aimed at the true height of the temple of Poetry early in life, so he grappled with the truth about the function of poetry just in his twenty-second year. Two of his poems, namely, *Sleep and Poetry* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, which respectively disclose to us Keats' starting point and final goal, as well as many of his brilliant letters full of suggestion and observations, deserve a special study from the point of view of "the end and aim of Poesy"² and the growth of the poet's mind.

Though so early as November, 1815, Keats says that as it is no use for him, a Londoner, trying to seek the Muse at

"Some flowery spot, sequester'd, wild, romantic,
That often must have seen a poet frantic,"³

he wants a place

"Where we may soft humanity put on,"⁴

¹ E. B. Browning: *Aurora Leigh*, I, 1004f. If the poetess meant to say that Keats was from his first attempt in verse a successful poet, the statement is, as Sir Sidney Colvin says, not accurate at all. But probably she meant that he wrote great poems without previous signs of such greatness, surprise following surprise. I quote her in the latter sense.

² *Sleep and Poetry*, 293.

³ *Epistle to G. F. Mathew*, 37f.

⁴ *Ibid*, 55.

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yet in *Sleep and Poetry*, written in the winter of 1816-17 as the manifesto of his poetic principles, he distinguishes the poetry of mere pleasure from the poetry of deep sympathy for one's fellow-creatures. He knows well that sleep is a pleasure and poetry is another, but at the same time he propounds that in poetry there is something else. While Sleep the "soft closer of our eyes"¹ is gentle, soothing, healthful, serene and even full of visions, poetry differs from it because

"The thought thereof is awful, sweet, and holy,
Chasing away all worldliness and folly,"²

for poetry is "sounds which will reach the Framer of all things."³ Though Keats has been often set aside as a poetic voluptuary and no more, there was in him, on the contrary, a vein of humanitarian idealism which can be traced even in this early manifesto, and his endeavour was to be a humanitarian idealist; even at that time he was already aware, of the "high poetic truth and seriousness," which are so conspicuous among Matthew Arnold's principles of literary criticism. Keats did, or tried to do, all that he could do in order to attain those virtues in his poetry, and wonderful was his passion for poetry. Shortly after the completion of the poem in question he wrote to John Hamilton Reynolds, "Whenever you write say a word or two on some passage in Shakespeare that may come rather new to you, which must be continually happening, notwithstanding that we read the same play forty times. . . . I find

¹ *Sleep and Poetry*, 11.

² *Ibid.*, 25f.

³ *Ibid.*, 39.

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I cannot exist without Poetry—without eternal Poetry half the day will not do—the whole of it—I began with a little, but habit has made me a Leviathan.”¹ His feast in poetry began with his early wonder at the beautiful Elfland of Spenser and the wide expanse “that deep-brow’d Homer rul’d as his demesne,” and then his masters were Shakespeare and Wordsworth, and still later Milton. When he was about sixteen Keats took his way through *The Faerie Queene* as absorbedly, as, in the words of his friend Charles Cowden Clarke, “a young horse would through a spring meadow—ramping!”² what he felt on first looking into Chapman’s Homer is well known to all lovers of English poetry. At a later date he told Leigh Hunt that he “thought so much about poetry, so long together, that he could not get to sleep at night.”³ All his days he led “a fervous life along with Poetry.”⁴ “Poetry,” he exclaimed elsewhere, “that is all I care for, all I live for.”⁵ With this fervour and passion for poetry he entered on his career as a poet. He desired to write all that was permitted, and

“Then the events of this wide world I’d seize
Like a strong giant, and my spirit teaze
Till at its shoulders it should proudly see
Wings to find out an immortality.”⁶

But this deeply introspective and subtle mind asks himself why he “should be a poet more than other

¹ 18th April, 1817.

² C. C. Clarke: *Recollections of Writers*, 1878, p. 123.

³ 10th May, 1817.

⁴ To Miss Jeffrey, May, 1819.

⁵ To J. H. Reynolds, 25th August, 1819.

⁶ *Sleep and Poetry*, 81-84.

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men, seeing how great a thing it is—how great things are to be gained by it,”¹ so that he says, “at last the idea has grown so monstrously beyond my seeming attainment, that the other day I nearly consented with myself to drop into a Phaeton.”² How dizzy it is to cast one’s eyes so low! and he thinks he is, to speak further in Shakespeare’s words, “one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade!” and falls sometimes into deep depression looking at the “Cliff of Poesy” towering above him.³ It is a serious matter to aspire to become a poet. “There is no greater Sin after the seven deadly than to flatter oneself into an idea of being a great Poet.”⁴

Thus, young Keats fully knew the perils of the path of poetry. But “’tis a disgrace,” he thought, “to fail, even in a huge attempt.”⁵ “Difficulties nerve the Spirit of a Man—they make our Prime Objects a Refuge as well as a Passion. The Trumpet of Fame is as a tower of Strength, the ambitious bloweth it and is safe.”⁶ Keats was, in fact, a hard worker. When he wrote the letters quoted above he used to “read and write about eight hours a day.”⁷ Four months later he told Haydon that within three weeks he had written one thousand lines of the third book of *Endymion*, and until the completion of the poem he would “keep as tight a rein as possible, nor suffer

¹ To Leigh Hunt, 10th May, 1817.

² *Ibid.*

³ Cf. Letters to B. R. Haydon, 10th May, 1817, and to B. Bailey, 8th October, 1817.

⁴ To Haydon, 10th May, 1817.

⁵ To Leigh Hunt, 10th May, 1817.

⁶ To Haydon, 10th May, 1817.

⁷ *Ibid.*

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himself to sleep.”¹ In his letters he twice quotes the proverb, “Rome was not built in a day.”² Even his travels were undertaken for the sake of his education in poetry. About his Scotch tour he said, “I should not have consented to myself these four months tramping in the highlands, but that I thought it would give me more experience, rub off more prejudice, use to more hardship, identify finer scenes, load me with grander mountains, and strengthen more my reach in Poetry, than would stopping at home among books, even though I should read Homer.”³ During the composition of *Hyperion* he exclaimed, “I have a new leaf to turn over: I must work; I must read; I must write,”⁴ and refused new acquaintances because he was unable to afford time for them and scarcely able to do his duty to those he had (perhaps referring to his four months’ attendance by the bedside of Tom, his brother). On 15th August, 1819, he wrote to B. Bailey, “Within these two months I have written 1,500 lines.” Four weeks later, already in his fatal illness, he said, “I am more frequently now contented to read and think, but now and then haunted with ambitious thoughts,”⁵ and by ambitious thoughts he meant writing masterly, poetry, which, however, was the enemy of his health, and the source of physical fever. In this way, although Keats did not pronounce any dictum on the relation between genius and study, he was himself an

¹ To B. Bailey, November, 1817.

² Cf. Letters to Haydon, 28th September, 1817, and to Bailey, November, 1817.

³ To Bailey, 18th July, 1818.

⁴ To R. Woodhouse, 18th December, 1818.

⁵ 21st September, 1819.

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embodiment of the law that the more highly gifted a poet is the harder he works.

Full of hopes for poetry Keats wished to be allowed ten years for his allotted span as a poet.

“O for ten years, that I may overwhelm
Myself in poesy, so I may do the deed
That my own soul has to itself decreed.”¹

But after the composition of *Sleep and Poetry* only three years were allotted to John Keats, and when in November, 1819, he wrote to John Taylor² referring to some dramatic poems which he intended to write, he had a few hasty months of poetic activity before him. In that short time he went through many countries that he had seen in long perspective, and continually tasted their pure fountains of poetic inspiration. Thus, the first stage young Keats was attracted to was the Kingdom of pure fancy—fancy which

“will bring, in spite of frost,
Beauties that the earth hath lost,”³

And this Kingdom of Fancy, which Keats called “the realm of Flora and old Pan”⁴ is the world of physical beauty in which Spenser’s Clarion delights and fairies of the “Midsummer Night’s Dream” are in their element. There can Keats “choose each pleasure that my fancy sees.”⁵ The two lines quoted, as the motto to his *Poems*, 1817, from Spenser’s *Muiopotmos: or, Fate of the Butterfly*, 209f., are

¹ *Sleep and Poetry*, 96-98.

² Cf. p. 3 *supra*, and for a similar thought see Buxton Forman’s edition of *Letters*, Vol. II, pp. 156 and 166.

³ *Fancy*, 29f.

⁴ *Sleep and Poetry*, 101f.

⁵ *Ibid*, 104

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“What more felicity can fall to creature
Than to enjoy delight with liberty?”

and they disclose to us exactly the state of Keats' mind at this stage. “He was in his glory,” says Haydon the painter, “in the fields. The humming of a bee, the sight of a flower, the glitter of the sun, seemed to make his nature tremble, his eyes flashed, his cheek glowed and his mouth quivered.” The fact that nothing beautiful seemed to escape this keen observer of nature and life is assured when we read the catalogues of things he liked which appear in his letters¹ to his sister, together with the testimony given by Joseph Severn and other friends. Even at the end of November, 1820, three months before his death, in his last letter known to us, he wrote to his old housemate, Charles Brown, “There is one thought enough to kill me; I have been well, healthy, alert, etc., walking with her [i.e. Fanny Brawne], and now—the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poetry, are great enemies to the recovery of the stomach.” In spite of fits of self-depression and hypochondria, he had such “wild joys of living” as Browning's David has and tells to the lethargic Saul. Keats did not, as we know in his letter to B. Bailey,² look for worldly happiness if it was not in his reach at the present hour. “Nothing startles me beyond the moment.”³ And it must have been hard for him to bid farewell to those joys he found in “the realm of Flora and old Pan.”

¹ 13th March, 17th April, and 29th August, 1819.

² 22nd November, 1817.

³ *Ibid.*

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But he resigned them with determination.

"I must pass them for a nobler life,
Where I may find the agonies, the strife
Of human hearts."¹

This was Keats' earnest resolution, which he kept from this date to the end of his poetic career. The same note is struck in *Endymion*, his most ambitious work, the symbolism of which is not so vague as has been remarked, if it is interpreted in this light, and in *The Fall of Hyperion*, his last and most notable poem, where he gives us the clearest utterance of his almost painful, exacting poetic creed :

"None can usurp this height . . .
But those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let them rest."

And Keats was surely one of those who were allowed to "usurp the height." He lived his life. What an affectionate and devoted brother he was, what a self-denying friend! "There is," he said, "a comfort in throwing oneself on the charity of one's friends."² When the "insatiable Haydon" was in monetary distress, Keats wrote to him, "I have that sort of fire in my heart that would sacrifice everything I have to your service." "I love England," he told Bailey, "I like its living men. . . . Scenery is fine—but human nature is finer—the sward is richer for the tread of a real nervous English foot—the Eagle's nest is finer, for the Mountaineer has looked into it."³ Interested in men and women as he was, Keats' poetic

¹ *Sleep and Poetry*, 123-125.

² To B. Bailey, 28th May, 1818.

³ 13th March, 1818.

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dæmon, whom now he calls the "charioteer,"¹ comes down from above and looks upon "Shapes of delight, of mystery and fear."² They murmur, laugh, smile and weep, flitting onward in a thousand different ways. Eagerly Keats desires to know what each of them thinks and feels, but seems yet unable to know it fully. He must confess:

"Most awfully intent
The driver of those steeds is forward bent
And seems to listen: O that I might know
All that he writes with such a hurrying glow."³

Moreover, his imagination seems to be particularly taken by

"a lovely wreath of girls
Dancing their sleek hair into tangled curls,"⁴

a group wherein he may find neither the agonies nor the strife of human hearts. As he humbly states that the doors of the third chamber in the large mansion of human life are as yet shut to him, at the time of the completion of *Sleep and Poetry* he does not yet fully feel the "Burden of the Mystery."⁵ It is eighteen months after this statement that he dares say, "Wonders are no wonders to me. I am more at home amongst Men and Women."⁶ For this delay in perception, however, Keats is not to be adversely criticised, when his age is considered. It is, on the contrary, very remarkable that he realised, when so young, what great poetry should be. Even

¹ *Sleep and Poetry*, 127.

² *Sleep and Poetry*, 54.

³ *Ibid.*, 151-154.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 149f.

⁵ Cf. the well-known letter to Reynolds, 3rd May, 1818.

⁶ To Taylor, 17th November, 1819. Then Keats was recasting *Hyperion*.

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Shakespeare was about thirty-six when he reached the "tragic period." It is natural for so young a poet as Keats to be still inclined to see "nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight."¹ Nevertheless, when he thinks of the "end and aim of Poesy" and "a sense of real things comes doubly strong" to him, verses of mere cleverness and brilliance seem nothing to him. A passage from a letter to Bailey may be quoted here as self-criticism on the lines 155-9 of *Sleep and Poetry*, though written over a year later than the poem: "I am sometimes so very sceptical as to think Poetry itself a mere Jack o' Lantern to amuse whoever may chance to be struck with its brilliance."² I do not hesitate to note that even in this poem he was unable to get rid of Cockneyism, the effect of his environment though he was fully aware of its weakness. Despite his questionings Keats does firmly believe in

" the great end
Of poesy, that it should be a friend
To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man,"³

and in the long run he keeps off Despondency, which he calls "a horrid Morbidity of Temperament—the greatest enemy and stumbling block I have to fear,"⁴ with diffidence he confesses his yet scanty wisdom, untrained psychological insight, and the fact that

" no great ministr'ing reason sorts
Out the dark mysteries of human souls
To clear conceiving : yet there ever rolls

¹ To Reynolds, 3rd May, 1818.

² 13th May, 1818.

³ *Sleep and Poetry*, 246f.

⁴ To Haydon, 11th May, 1817.

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A vast idea before me, and I glean
Therefrom my liberty."¹

It is from this vast idea ever rolling before him that he has derived his belief in "the end and aim of Poesy." Now he feels himself as if he were a member of an expedition to an unknown ocean, and is determined to do his best for the exploration.

The poetic creed which Keats had attained by 1818 was not a new phenomenon in the history of literature. In this respect, Wordsworth can be named as his immediate predecessor to whom he may owe much even in his view of the relation of beauty with truth. In fact, he regards the Lake poet so highly that he thinks "Wordsworth is deeper than Milton"² because the latter does not think into the human heart as the former does. Still it must be borne in mind that there is a great difference between the elder and the younger poet. While one is bare in style and austere in taste, the other is habitually inclined to "indulge at large in his store of luxuries,"³ by which—the word is favourite with him—he means refined and intense enjoyments or sensuous delights. Till the time of *The Fall of Hyperion*, that is, towards the end of his poetic career, there was a strife in Keats' mind between his inclination to luxury and his aspiration as a humanitarian idealist, and the idealist in him was hard put to it to win that fight.

II. *Endymion*

Endymion is the most noteworthy, as the symbolistic

¹ *Sleep and Poetry*, 228-292.

² To Reynolds, 3rd May, 1818.

³ *Sleep and Poetry*, 346f.

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expression of his ideas about the end and aim of poetry, of all his works written after *Sleep and Poetry* and before *The Fall of Hyperion*. Keats began it about four months after the completion of the first manifesto of his poetic creed and finished it in eight months, in December of 1817. The symbolical meaning of it is, as Sir Sidney Colvin expounds it, the experiences of a poet's soul in pursuit of essential Beauty. The shepherd prince of Latmos, like the poet in Shelley's *Alastor*, who has deeply drunk of the fountains of beauty and truth and is still insatiate, wanders about the world. Since he has been, in a dream, visited by Cynthia, the goddess of perfect Beauty, he longs for her day and night and can never find any peace of mind. Forlorn and restless, he sets out in quest of this unknown lover, descending even into the silent mysteries of earth. He has seen a "faint eternal eventide of gems"¹ and approached the fair shrine of Diana; but

"There, when new wonders ceas'd to float before,
And thoughts of self came on, how crude and sore
The journey homeward to habitual self!"²

The horror of solitude overcomes him; the shrine of Diana, the flowers springing out of the marble, the charm of soft music, the story of Venus and Adonis, the diamond balustrade, the jasmine bower, even the embrace of Cynthia in a dream—none of these can satisfy the love-lorn Endymion. It is only when he is deeply moved by the ill-fated lovers, Alpheus and Arethusa, and prays to the goddess Diana that their

¹ *Endymion*, II, 225.

² *Ibid.*, II, 274-276.

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suffering may be soothed and assuaged, that he for the first time gets rid of self-centred seclusion and is relieved of his own restlessness. This reminds us of the Ancient Mariner, who at the very moment he blessed the water-snakes was able to pray and get rid of the dead albatross hung about his neck as the sign of the curse.

Even before his departure from Latmos Endymion knew that happiness lies

“ in that which becks
Our ready minds to fellowship divine,
A fellowship with essence ; till we shine
Full alchemiz'd, and free of space.”¹

By “fellowship with essence” is meant life devoted to essential Beauty, which later on Keats considers to be identical with Truth, as we noted in the preceding chapter. Sensuous delight in nature and romance, which he calls “luxury,” is to him at this period one of the aspects of “the clear religion of heaven,”² namely, the fellowship with the spirit of essential Beauty and Truth. To enjoy such “luxuries” as he enumerates in one of his finest passages :

“ Fold
A rose leaf round thy finger's taperness
And soothe thy lips : hist, when the airy stress
Of music's kiss impregnates the free winds,
And with a sympathetic touch unbinds
Æolian magic from their lucid wombs :
Then old songs waken from enclouded tombs ;
Old ditties sigh above their father's grave ;
Ghosts of melodious prophecyings rave
Round every spot where trod Apollo's foot ;

¹ *Endymion*, I, 777-780.

² *Ibid.*, I, 781.

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Bronze clarions awake, and faintly bruit,
Where long ago a giant battle was ;
And, from the turf, a lullaby doth pass
In every place where infant Orpheus slept : ”¹

—to delight in these things which happen in the enchanted realm of Flora and old Pan, is to step “into a sort of oneness,” that is, into the fellowship with essential Beauty. But it should be observed that there in this realm of fancy, “our state is like a floating spirit’s ”²—a state like a dream. And when we awake we feel that this fantasia was after all like a bubble, and wish to stand on the *terra firma* of humanitarian idealism. “Works of genius are the first things in this world,” he thinks, but in a moment denies it, “No ! for probity and disinterestedness . . . holds and grasps the culmination of any spiritual honours that can be paid to anything in this world.”³ So highly does Keats speak of disinterestedness, which can be attained only through love and friendship, when these have purged the individual of self.

In contrast with the above enumerated “luxuries,” Keats says that there are

“Richer entanglements, enthrallments far
More self-destroying, leading, by degrees,
To the chief intensity ; the crown of these
Is made of love and friendship, and sits high
Upon the forehead of humanity.”⁴

These richer entanglements are a different type of

¹ *Endymion*, I, 781-794.

² *Ibid*, I, 797.

³ To George and Thomas Keats, 13th January, 1818, when *Endymion* was in the press.

⁴ *Endymion*, I, 798-802.

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Beauty, by no means so heart-easing as "luxuries"; this type is usually accompanied with painful sympathies for others, and often disturbs our sensuous delights, however refined they may be. Besides, the more disturbing it is, the more effective it is in the purging of our egotistic blemishes. And even love and friendship can sometimes be mere enjoyments for one's own sake. Therefore, no human soul moved by humanitarian idealism can endure any luxury,

"Unless it did, though fearfully, espy
A hope beyond the shadow of a dream,"¹

because the final stage of the "fellowship divine" is to be attained only by the renunciation of self, which comes from the suffering for others. Fully conscious of this, Keats tells his publisher that this passage on the gradations of happiness is "a regular stepping of the Imagination towards a truth."² Attaching great importance to this passage, he goes on to say, "My having written that argument will perhaps be of the greatest service to me of anything I ever did." And as he believes that it is his "first step towards the chief attempt in the drama—the playing of different natures with joy and sorrow," so it is an important key to the symbolism of *Endymion*, which is difficult to follow amid the intricate flowery mazes of imagination. Moreover, this passage is to be appreciated as a disclosure of the poet's personal view of Beauty in relation to suffering, which is the keynote to most of his ambitious works. The same strain is sounded in *Sleep and Poetry*, in which the poet

¹ *Endymion*, I, 856f.

² To Taylor, 30th January, 1818.

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says assuredly that he should quit "the realm of Flora and old Pan" for a nobler life where he may "find the agonies, the strife of human hearts." Now he says that love should not "leave us fancy-sick" nor selfish, but it should make us selfless in its intensity and sympathy, as is the case with Endymion on the occasion of blessing Alpheus and Arethusa. It should be a salvation. Keats, however, is still left, as in *Sleep and Poetry*, somewhat vague in his idea of the reality of life, which it is the aim and end of poetry to attain. Though he "espies a hope beyond the shadow of a dream," the hope is yet far from being realised. Hence the sentimental apotheosis of love in the opening lines of Book II.

The second step for purging Endymion of his egotism is taken when he meets with Glaucus and Scylla under the sea. Even "argent luxuries" of the Moon, the symbol of essential Beauty, fail to lull Endymion to a lasting dream. While he looks on the Moon in rapture, he is surprised at the sight of Glaucus, the careworn fisherman, sitting on a weeded rock. Though at first he

"Look'd high defiance, lo ! his heart 'gan warm
With pity, for the grey-hair'd creature wept."¹

And kneeling before the care-worn fisherman-sage, Endymion also wept in penitence. Reading the mysterious prophecy about Glaucus and himself, he cries

"Say, I entreat thee, what achievement high
Is, in this restless world, for me reserv'd?"²

¹ *Endymion*, III, 282f.

² *Ibid*, III, 714f.

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And then the youth does all he can for the old philosopher, whom he changes into a youthful lover and for whom he raises Scylla from death. Endymion goes onward in his high employ, re-animating all the dead there and leaving them to their happiness. He is

“Distracted with the richest overflow
Of joy that ever pour’d from heaven.”¹

This joy could not be given to Endymion unless he had done his utmost for the sake of Glaucus and others. Here again human sympathy is the keynote to the happiness of Endymion and the secret of a true poet. If he had remained ego-centric, he would not have achieved the title of a true poet.

“The youth elect
Must do the thing, or both will be destroy’d.”²

In the fourth book of the poem, Endymion’s sympathy and love for the lonely Indian Maid bring him to his final communion with essential Beauty. Until he is aware of the identification of the Moon, Cynthia and the Indian Maid, he has suffered from a conflict in himself; for he was afraid, in his love for the maid, he might betray his heavenly love. He could not discern which is more important, human sympathy for the actual or mysterious yearning for the ethereal. He says he has a triple soul, and feels his heart is divided by his love towards the actual and the essential. Now he cries,

“There never liv’d a mortal man, who bent
His appetite beyond his natural sphere,
But starv’d and died. My sweetest Indian, here,

¹ *Endymion*, III, 805f.

² *Ibid*, III, 710f.

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Here will I kneel, for thou redeemed hast
My life from too thin breathing : gone and past
Are cloudy phantasms,"¹

and then, bidding farewell to both his sister and the Indian Maid, he intends to live a hermit's life in a mossy cave, because he is afraid he may not attain the "fellowship divine."

"If impiously an earthly realm I take."²

Realising how he has indulged in sensuous delights in "the realm of Flora and old Pan," this "King of the butterflies"³ confesses in penitence,

"Why, I have been a butterfly, a lord
Of flowers, garlands, love-knots, silly posies,
Groves, meadows, melodies, and arbour roses ;
My kingdom's at its death, and just it is
That I should die with it."⁴

But at this moment he is "spiritualised"⁵ by an unlooked-for change in power of Cynthia, his heavenly love, who appears to him as the Indian Maid, his earthly love. And this spiritualisation occurs in him because he is just entering the noble life where he is to find "the agonies, the strife of human hearts."

In the draft of the preface to *Endymion*, copied in his letter to Reynolds, 9th April, 1818, he says, "Before I began I had no inward feel of being able to finish ; and as I proceeded my steps were all uncertain." There may be much of diffidence in this statement, and yet the fact remains that he was

¹ *Endymion*, IV, 646-651.

² *Ibid.*, IV, 854.

³ *Ibid.*, IV, 952.

⁴ *Ibid.*, IV, 937-941.

⁵ *Ibid.*, IV, 993. By being "spiritualised" Keats probably means the soul's utter purgation of its selfishness.

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sure, at the beginning, neither of the significance of the plot nor of the symbolical undertone of the poem. Indeed, the symbolism of it is not methodically or unmistakably expressed in the work in its ultimate form. Being conscious of this, Keats takes occasion in the published preface, which discloses his clear-sighted introspection and disinterested self-criticism, to regret that in the poem may be perceived "great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished." There was still proceeding in his mind at this period the conflict between the born lover of "luxuries" and the poet-humanitarian eager to "soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man."¹ The lover of "luxuries" was still holding his own in this argument. "Nature's gentle doings," for example, "sweet peas on tip-toe for a flight," the moon "with a gradual swim coming into the blue with all her light," and "the waving of the mountain pine in the calm grandeur of a sober line"²—these and all their host were more attractive to Keats of this period than "the agonies, the strife of human hearts," and naturally so; I wonder how many poets as young as Keats are at their best when they treat of their commiseration with others?

III. *The Fall of Hyperion*

Although that noble fragment addressed to Maia in the grand style is truly a great surprise as having been composed in the first period of Keats' poetic activity, he cannot, in 1818, yet be called one of those

¹ *Sleep and Poetry*, 247.

² "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," 63, 57, 114f, and 127f.

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"bards who died content on pleasant sward,
Leaving great verse unto a little clan."¹

He was in that year scarcely endowed with their "old vigour." Compared with this great fragment, what trifles are the *Lines on the Mermaid Tavern* (February, 1818) and "Bards of Passion and of Mirth" (December 1818), both dealing with old bards. In the main, Keats was still delighted with his "luxuries." In spite of Mr. G. B. Shaw's opinion,² Keats' main interest is not in any attack on Capitalism, but in the fate of devoted lovers. In order to find pleasure, he is still inclined to think, the mind should not be imprisoned in itself;

"Ever let the Fancy roam,
Pleasure never is at home."³

The introspective mind of Keats tries to range outside itself, where the sweet joys of Nature can be found at every step. Even in the last days of April, 1819, in his great days the poet's Psyche preferred lying calm-breathed,

"'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian."⁴

It is in Hyperion that Keats for the first time treats, with severity, of the "giant agony of the world." The poem accordingly marks an epoch in Keats'

¹ *Ode to Maia*, 7f.

² Cf. Mr. Shaw's article in *The Keats Memorial Volume*, p. 175f. He is wide of the mark when he interprets *Isabella* in the Marxian and Bolshevik light. Keats would have never "come down from *Hyperions* and *Endymions* to tin tacks as a very fullblooded modern revolutionist," however enthusiastic the poet might be in humanitarian idealism; never, I may add, even if he had lived long enough to be a second Methuselah.

³ *Fancy*, 1f.

⁴ *Ode to Psyche*, 13f.

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development, and divides his poetic activity into two periods.¹ The whole symbolical purport and meaning of the myth are given in the speech of Oceanus in Book II, lines 203-229 :

“O folly! for to bear all naked truths,
And to envisage circumstance, all calm,
That is the top of sovereignty . . .

So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,
A power more strong in beauty, born of us
And fated to excel us, as we pass
In glory that old Darkness . . .

. . . . for 'tis the eternal law

That first in beauty should be first in might.”

So, Keats seems here to think, the poet should be first in might if he is first in beauty, and ought to master the reality of life by calmly bearing all naked truths and courageously facing every circumstance, even though it mean experiencing “the agonies, the strife of human hearts.” If a poet wants to influence other human beings, he must rely on the strength of beauty. Here is implied an interesting view of Keats’ about Beauty and Truth, which was noticed in the preceding chapter.

Though it is observable that the vein of “luxurious” poetry continues to be found in some works of 1819, like *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *Ode to Psyche*, their great distinction is their deeper tone, and in them sympathy for the miseries of the world is not only inherent but sometimes positively expressed, in bare and bold words. Even *The Eve of St. Agnes* with its exquisite

¹ The second period consists only of a year—too short a time for other poets. But the year 1819 is the *annus mirabilis* in Keats’ life, in which were written the two wonderful fragments about Hyperion, as well as most of his poetic tales and odes.

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descriptions is not a simple love-story; the under-current of the poem is human sympathy. What enhances the architectonic unity in the plot of the poem is, from beginning to end, the contrast between so bitter a cold as makes even the sculptured dead "ache in icy hoods and mails" on the one hand, and the vital warmth of "the argent revelry" and of Madeline's, who "unclasped her warmèd jewels one by one," on the other; between the deep-rooted enmity of the two families and the passionate love of their two young members; and between the old age and death of the meagre, barefooted and wan beadsman and the beldame weak in body and soul, on the one hand, and the youthfulness and adventure of the hero "with sleep," flees away with her lover to a home over the southern moor, on the other. In this poem Keats sets off the wretchedness of life against the happiness of lovers.

To turn to *The Eve of St. Mark*, which is certainly not simple revelry in the many antiquated legendary things depicted in it. D. G. Rossetti supposes, in his letter to H. Buxton Forman, that "the heroine—remorseful after trifling with a sick and now absent lover—might make her way to the minster porch to learn his fate by the spell, and perhaps see his figure enter but not return"; and yet its author writes, about two weeks after leaving it in a fragmentary state, as if he thought the poem not worth finishing, "I have come to this conclusion—never to write for the sake of writing or making a poem, but from running over with any little knowledge or experience which many years of reflection may

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perhaps give me; otherwise I will be dumb.”¹ The decision testifies to his deep seriousness in writing poetry. Some ten days after this letter, he makes an obstinate questioning, “Why did I laugh to-night” when he is very sad and lonely. “Circumstances are like Clouds,” he laments, “continually gathering and bursting. While we are laughing, the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of events—while we are laughing it sprouts, it grows, and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck.”² Still, as he is sure that “Verse, Fame and Beauty are intense,” in the letter just quoted from, the same chord is touched as in *Sleep and Poetry*: “Even so we have leisure to reason on the misfortunes of our friends; our own touch us too nearly for words. Very few men have ever arrived at a complete disinterestedness of mind: very few have been influenced by a pure desire of the benefits of others—in the greater part of the Benefactors of Humanity some meretricious motive has sullied their greatness—some melodramatic scenery has fascinated them.”

In spite, or rather on account, of his burning love for Fanny Brawne, *La Belle Dame sans Merci* was written, and then, within a month, there came all those great odes except that to Autumn. Sympathy could not be deeper than that which he expresses for the knight-at-arms whom “la belle Dame hath in thrall!” In the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats passes from that sympathy to his belief that art is a consolation and beacon-light to humanity. When he addresses the Grecian Urn,

¹ To Haydon, 8th March, 1819.

² To G. and G. Keats, 19th March, 1819.

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"When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man,"

he is re-iterating what he expressed, two and a half years before in *Sleep and Poetry*, defining the great end and aim of poetry. The *Grecian Urn* may be called an extended expression of the poet's deep sympathy for the wretchedness and shortness of human life, inasmuch as it points out a consolation coming from art which is eternal. And to Keats, one who sees that

"in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,"¹

is one who knows that Beauty is the inseparable compassion of Melancholy, whose subject every human being is doomed to be. The melancholy note of the *Ode to a Nightingale* as well as of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* comes mainly from the notion *ars longa, vita brevis*. Keats seems to say that poetry, like the nightingale, should make us happy in its happiness and take us to

"Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn."²

In the ode *To Autumn*, though we miss that poetical ardour and fire with which we are charmed in other odes, "a more thoughtful and quiet power" is substituted, as if Keats' sympathy towards men and women was growing mellow along with the "close bosom-friend of the maturing sun." The passage in *Lamia* describing how Lycius, the Corinthian

¹ *Ode on Melancholy*, iii.

² *Ode to a Nightingale*, vii.

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youth, staying at the "purple-lined palace of sweet sin," started at a thrill of trumpets that came deafening the swallow's twitter, and

"His spirit pass'd beyond its golden bourn
Into the noisy world almost forsworn,"¹

—that passage seems to mean that a poet formerly of fancy and "luxury" is now almost wholly devoted to bitter reality. The top of sovereignty is to bear all naked truths. Unless this interpretation of the central idea of the poem is accepted, it is very difficult, as is discussed elsewhere,² to understand why love is ridiculed, while "cold philosophy" is scornfully rejected.

At last, in *The Fall of Hyperion* we hear the most articulate utterance of Keats' final view of the aim and end of great poetry. The induction to the poem tells us that the poet, and the poet only, can with his vision weave a paradise for humankind; that is to say, the poet should be a prophet, champion, and leader. Then Keats proceeds to describe what the function of poetry is. First, how shall we regard "luxuries"? Shall we pass by them as if they were nothing? Sensuous beauties in nature and art should not be simply rejected; they, too, are things of beauty; but it should be remembered that to indulge them is not the end of great poetry. The uncorrected intoxication of "luxuries" is the stage of poetic activity in which the "fancy-sick" Endymion left Latmos to wander about forgetting everything in the actual world. This is, strictly speaking, "sleep" and not

¹ *Lamia*, II, 32f.

² Chapter I, Section 2.

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"poetry." When the sense of life returns all the gorgeous beauties, tempting delicacies and intoxicants disappear, and what overwhelms the poet's mind is nothing but the temple of Truth, "that eternal domed monument" with a treasury of strange vessels and large draperies within its walls. Here is again expressed the belief that to bear all naked truths is the top of sovereignty. The advice given to the poet by Moneta sitting beside the shrine of Truth is at once comforting and dreadful. She advises the poet not to miss any chance of inspiration, which rarely comes to him in the short span of his mortal life, for otherwise he will never be able to write any true poem. Keats is now more fully aware how hard the proposed task is, than when he wrote, in *Sleep and Poetry*, about "the end and aim of Poesy" as well as the toil and pains of a poet. Though he has been sure of "that poetic ardour and fire"¹ still burning in himself, the voice of the prophetess makes him start up at the thought that he may lose the poetic ardour and fire

¹ Quoted from Keats' letter to his brother George, dated 21st September, 1819, when he was engaged in *The Fall of Hyperion*. A passage in that letter may be referred to, because it seems to me to be the key to the symbolic meanings of *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 107-136, of which Sir Sidney Colvin says in his exhaustive *Life of Keats* (p. 451), "all these phases of the poet's ordeal are impressively told, but are hard to interpret otherwise than dubiously and vaguely." If we take the following pathetic passage as the clue there will be a definitive interpretation of those lines in the poem: "Some think I have lost that poetic ardour and fire 'tis said I once had—The fact is, perhaps I have; but, instead of that, I hope I shall substitute a more thoughtful and quiet power. I am more frequently now contented to read and think, but now and then haunted with ambitious thoughts. Quieter in my pulse, improved in my digestion, exerting myself against vexing speculations, scarcely content to write the best verses for the fever they leave behind. I want to compose without this fever. I hope I one day shall."

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before his hard task is done.¹ And previous to the approaching fatal hour, he thinks, he should enter a higher stage of poetic activity. It is at this "ambitious thought . . . to write the best verses" that he is able to gain the lowest step of the innumerable degrees leading to the altar of Poetry, that is, he has narrowly escaped from failure in his attempt at great poetry, and with "a more thoughtful and quiet power" he approaches the altar. Then he is told that his poetic activity will not be exhausted as long as he works hard with a firm belief in the mission of a poet, of seizing the reality of things and singing of it with a selfless spirit.

Thus, Keats can give his most powerful wording of his matured view of the function of poetry in the following lines :

" 'None can usurp this height,' returned that shade,
'But those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let them rest.
All else who find a haven in the world,
Where they may thoughtless sleep away their days,
If by a chance into this fane they come,
Rot on the pavement where thou rotted'st half.' "²

On the other hand, thousands of people of the practical and unimaginative type

"Who love their fellows even to the death,
Who feel the giant agony of the world,
And more, like slaves to poor humanity,
Labour for mortal good,"³

¹ He has already been attacked by consumption, and we may suppose he knows he must die in a few years.

² *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 148-153.

³ *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 156-160.

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need not come to this temple for the purpose of being purged of their egotistic enjoyment, because they are no weak dreamers, and

“They see no wonder but the human face.”¹

Though this glorification of practical, unimaginative, but disinterested people may sound out of tune with Keats' usual way of regarding poetry and poets, it is provable, on the contrary, that it is in harmony, if we remember how highly he used to speak of disinterestedness in men and women either imaginative or practical. He might have thought that a poet is great in proportion to what he does for the world. Keats was so fully conscious of the value of a life devoted to doing practical good, that, even when the public was bitterly denouncing his *Endymion*, he said, “I would jump down Ætna for any great public good,”² and again, “I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good to the world.”³ To be a poet was, for him, to do good for others in his own way. “Although I take Poetry to be chief, yet there is something else wanting to one who passes his life among Books and thoughts on Books”⁴—is not this a remarkable protestation in a writer who has, for generations, been stigmatised as a sensuous poet? “I am ambitious of doing the world some good: if I should be spared, that may be of maturer years—in the interval I will assay to reach to as high a summit in poetry as the nerve be-

¹ *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 163.

² To Haydon, 9th April, 1818.

³ To J. Taylor, 24th April, 1818.

⁴ To Reynolds, 27th April, 1818.

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stowed upon me suffer.”¹ When he was engaged in writing *The Fall of Hyperion*, he was “convinced more and more, every day, that fine writing is next to fine doing, the top thing in the world.”² In furtherance of his statements when we think of Keats’ whole-hearted devotion to his brothers, sister and friends, we can be sure of his being one of those “who love their fellows even to the death.”

About seventeen months before, Keats said in that wonderful letter to Reynolds that in the Chamber of Maiden-Thought “we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight,” but now in November 17th, 1819, that is, two or three months after he wrote *The Fall of Hyperion* we find him writing to John Taylor, “Wonders are no wonders to me. I am at home amongst Men and Women,” and we may say he has entered the Chamber of the Burden of the Mystery.

“The poet and the dreamer are distinct,
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.
The one pours out a balm upon the world,
The other vexes it,”³

and

“Only the dreamer venoms all his days,
Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve.”⁴

“Sure a poet is a sage,
A humanist, physician to all men.”⁵

When we perceive that he truly said there grew

¹ To Woodhouse, 27th October, 1818.

² To Reynolds, 25th August, 1819.

³ *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 199-202.

⁴ *Ibid*, I, 175f.

⁵ *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 198f.

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“A power within me of enormous ken
To see as a god sees, and take the depth
Of things as nimbly as the outward eye
Can size and shape pervade,”¹

our regret is intensified that a tragic fate overtook him so soon after the composition of this promising fragment, which has made critics dwell on the “promise of Keats” and not on his achievement as a poet, and has made it impossible for him to be seen in the character of a dramatist, which it was his “great ambition” to fulfil.

¹ *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 303-306.

AXIOMS OF POETRY

III

AXIOMS OF POETRY

I. "*Fine Excess*," *Spontaneity and Inevitability*

WHEN *Endymion* was in the press, Keats thought of three "axioms" or formulæ on which he acted in poetry and gave them to his publisher, John Taylor (27th February, 1818). As is elsewhere pointed out, he was a poet of very active imagination and was easily carried away by objects under his perception, losing himself in them; and notwithstanding that his letters are extremely suggestive and disclose the depth of his insight, luminous and comprehensive exposition was not the thing he much cared for, and in fact he never attained it. So far as the faculty of large reasoning is concerned, he was, one might say, almost nothing compared with Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. And as usual, in his letter to his publisher he said what occurred to him, and not what was deliberately thought out, to illustrate what poetry should be with regard to diction—brilliant remarks, though imperfect in intellectual lucidity. Consequently these "axioms" are in some respects by no means self-evident, and interpretation is needed.

The first axiom is, "Poetry should surprise by a fine excess, and not by singularity; it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance." Probably Keats

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was of opinion that poetry should surprise the reader by "richness" (to use the word he liked), and not by anything eccentric or esoteric. As the word "excess" is modified with the epithet, the phrase can be interpreted to mean exuberance in things of beauty, which is, in Keats' terminology, often called "luxury."

He did not only preach, but he practised, what he said in the first part of this axiom. His poems surprise us, in fact, by the abundance of "luxury" filling every sense "with spiritual sweets to plenitude as bees gorge full their cells."¹ What Keats called "fine excess" can be translated, in more ordinary expression, as suggestion and concentration, which shall be discussed in connection with the second axiom. Only he was, in his early years, so fond of sensuous effects that he used these misleading terms. Hence there is truth in the generally-accepted verdict that "the most obvious characteristic of Keats' poetry is certainly its abundant sensuousness,"² if the epithet "obvious" is equivalent to the phrase "easily perceptible." Abundance and delicacy in idealised sensations of sight, sound, odour, taste and touch are surely conspicuous in his poetry. As I have already touched on his singular endowment of the other senses, I shall now give a few illustrations of the fresh energy of his colour-sense. Though he was a happy observer of every shade of colour from Night's "dark-grey hood" to the "tiger-moth's

¹ *Endymion*, III, 39-40.

² David Masson: "The Life and Poetry of Keats" (*Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Other Essays*, 1875, p. 178).

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deep-damasked wings," he seems to have preferred rich and bright colours, for example,

"luxurious bright, milky, soft and rosy."¹

"Apollo's upward fire
Made every eastern cloud a silvery pyre
Of brightness,"²

"a magic bed
Of sacred ditamy, and poppies red."³

"dark velvet
Edges them round, and they have golden pits."⁴

He liked "dazzling hues"⁵ better than subdued colours, though he was sometimes attracted by "wild uncertainty and shadows grim"⁶ and vague imagery is one of the chief characteristics of his poetry. This taste for tropical colouring must have greatly appealed to R. Browning, in whose poetry we can trace some influence of Keats.⁷ His work before 1819 is much like

"the mid forest brake
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms,"⁸

so full of "fine excesses" that in its mazes the reader is apt to lose his way. The young poet is not in the

¹ "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," 27.

² *Endymion*, I, 95-97.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 554f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 874f., flowers are spoken of.

⁵ *Lamia*, I, 47. *Hyperion*, I, 176-180, quoted on another page, would be another good illustration.

⁶ *Endymion*, II, 273.

⁷ Browning was very fond of glowing colours. Compare incidentally Keats' description of Saturn "quiet as a stone," so that "His old right hand lay nerveless, listless, dead, Unsceptred," (*Hyperion*, I, 18f), with that by Browning of Saul, who, stretching out both arms, "relaxed not a muscle, but hung there, in agony, drear and stark, blind and dumb" (*Saul*, iv).

⁸ *Endymion*, I, 18f.

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least degree to be blamed for the lack of any "fine excess," but cannot be said to be altogether free from drawbacks of "singularity"; in some earlier works he indulged in a trivial daintiness, and allowed eccentric images, such as "green evening,"¹ to appear in his most ambitious work. He was accused of this faultiness even by Hazlitt, who, in the first edition of his *Select British Poets, or New Elegant Extracts from Chaucer to the Present Time*, 1824, says (p. xv): "He displayed extreme tenderness, beauty, originality and delicacy of fancy; all he wanted was manly strength and fortitude to reject the temptations of singularity in sentiment and expression." This statement, however, does not hold true with Keats' later works, which are, in the main, free from singularity.

Next, as to the second half of the axiom, a passage may be quoted from a letter to Reynolds written in the same month as the axiom.² "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us, and, if we do not agree, seems to put its hand into its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle or amaze it with itself, but with its subject. How beautiful are the retired flowers! How would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway, crying out, 'Admire me, I am a violet! Dote upon me, I am a primrose!'" In this remark Keats meant to say that poetry should win its reader with its natural excellence. A similar proposal is made in the following lines which depreciate Byron and other careless "Hectorers in proud bad verse":

¹ *Endymion*, II, 72.

² February, 1818.

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“in truth we’ve had
Strange thunders from the potency of song ;
Mingled indeed with what is sweet and strong,
From majesty : but in clear truth the themes
Are ugly clubs, the Poets Polyphemes
Disturbing the grand sea. A drainless shower
Of light is poesy ; ’tis the supreme of power ;
’Tis might half slumb’ring on its own right arm.
The very archings of her eye-lids charm
A thousand willing agents to obey,
And still she governs with the mildest sway :
But strength alone though of the Muses born
Is like a fallen angel : trees uptorn,
Darkness, and worms, and shrouds, and sepulchres
Delight it ; for it feeds upon the burrs,
And thorns of life ; forgetting the great end
Of poesy, that it should be a friend
To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man.”¹

Because poetry is supreme might half-slumbering
on its own right arm, its author should, hidden in
the light of thought (in another poet’s words) be
content to sing unbidden, till the world is moved
unawares to sympathy with unsuspected hopes and
fears. Think of some Greek

“bards who died content on pleasant sward,
Leaving great verse unto a little clan.”²

Though they died unheard

“Save of the quiet primrose, and the span
Of heaven and few ears,”

their poetry had their “old vigour” and was “rich
in the simple worship of a day.” Even between the
Elizabethan writers and Keats’ contemporaries there
was, he thought, a great difference : “each of the

¹ *Sleep and Poetry*, 230-247.

² *Ode to Maia*.

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moderns like an Elector of Hanover governs his petty state, and knows how many straws are swept daily from causeways in all his dominions, and has a continual itching that all the housewives should have their coppers well scoured. The ancients were Emperors of vast Provinces, they had only heard of the remote ones and scarcely cared to visit them . . . I don't mean to say to deny Wordsworth's grandeur and Hunt's merit, but I mean to say we need not to be teased with grandeur and merit when we can have them uncontaminated and unobtrusive."¹

Poetry should be as spontaneous and inevitable as possible; it should not be obtrusive or bizarre for the sake of sensationalism or singularity. Shakespeare is the superb example in this respect, too. Enormously he had the quality of forming a man of achievement which Keats called "*Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."² It is this power of presenting profound emotions with spontaneity and inevitability that the young poet attached great importance to in poetry. When he wrote, "I never found so many beauties in the Sonnets—they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally—in the intensity of working out conceits,"³ he was probably thinking of the "negative capability" of his "presider."

In order to "strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts and appear almost a remembrance," poetry should be at once great, spontaneous

¹ To Reynolds, 3rd February, 1818.

² To G. and T. Keats, 28th February, 1818.

³ To Reynolds, 22nd November, 1817.

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and inevitable. By spontaneity it is meant that a work is not studied, though exquisite; not a *tour de force*, though striking; not commonplace though universal; and by inevitability, that the work is nothing but the sole expression of the emotion, there being no other proper way of presenting it. If poetry is spontaneous and inevitable, with the intensity of emotion which underlies everybody's subconsciousness, the poet can raise that emotion up to the reader's threshold of consciousness and make him share the beauty and truth in the poem. When Shelley said that "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar," and D. G. Rossetti noted that "Poetry should seem to the hearer to have been always present to his thought, but never before heard," both of them were speaking of the same thing that Keats did. Poetry may present *quod ab omnibus, quod ubique, quod semper*; only it should be a wording of the reader's highest thoughts on the subject, discarding the commonplace and trivial.

Those people, like the *fin-de-siècle* symbolists, who think that poetry should say something singular, bizarre, grotesque, or esoteric, may contradict Keats' formula. But before doing so they must consider what is the point at issue. Keats pronounces sentence on singularity because it lacks universality which comes from the spontaneous and inevitable expression of man. So he might be dissatisfied, for instance, with Gray's *Elegy*, because it strikes the reader not as a wording of his *highest* thoughts, though of his own. Moreover, it is doubtful, strictly speaking,

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whether the *Elegy*, altogether, seems to the reader almost a remembrance. It is, I am afraid, too much studied and ornate to seem a remembrance. Is there, on the other hand, anything bizarre or esoteric in such verses as the following?

"Duncan is in his grave,
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well."
(*Shakespeare.*)

"But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me."
(*Wordsworth.*)

"Round he throws his baleful eyes."
(*Milton.*)

"With its little brimming eye,
And its yellow rims so pale,
And its crimp and curdled leaf."
(*Clare.*)

No explanation is necessary about these examples of spontaneity and inevitability except the last, which is quoted from a beautiful poem called *The Primrose Bank*, edited for the first time by Mr. Edmund Blunden. Clare's description of the primrose has its delicate minute truth to fact, its pure simple sincerity of touch and easy spontaneous style of diction. And the poet's "unparalleled intimacy with the English countryside and rare power of transfusing himself into the life"¹ of plants and animals, which have been pointed out, together with his other characteristics, by the most enthusiastic and pious editor of the poet, give something indescribable to these lines and strike the reader by a "fine excess," because the primrose

¹ *Madrigals and Chronicles*, being newly-found Poems written by John Clare, edited with a Preface and Commentary by Edmund Blunden, 1924, p. xiii.

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comes to us with all its beauty of humility and modesty through the magic of affection. Only, this is not the grand style, which is characteristic of those masters from whom the other quotations are given.

The mention of John Clare calls our attention to an important thing in connection with Keats' first axiom. Clare was surely an author with a divine gift of perception, one of the very few poets to whom the old saying "*nascitur, non fit*" can be truly applied, and yet is his work as a whole an expression of our "*highest* thoughts?" His powers were concentrated upon the particular more than the universal, and "nothing startled [him] beyond the moment" as Keats said of himself. Clare was, like Keats, absorbed in natural objects, but could not tell us their symbolical meanings, which Keats could—could give us, in Milton's words,

"Those thoughts that wander through eternity."

This lack of reflection is no sign of a *great* poet, however genuine he may be. Greatness of poetry lies in the fact that it is not only spontaneous, but also rich in the highest thoughts. As Wordsworth's view that "Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge" and "its object is truth" is restated by Keats in his dictum that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," so in this "axiom" he seems to be echoing what Wordsworth says in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800, that "all good poetry is the *spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings*: and though this be true Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who,

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being possessed of more than usual *organic* sensibility, had also *thought long and deeply*,¹ and probably anticipating Matthew Arnold, who says that "the grand style arises in poetry, when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject."²

II. *Touches of Beauty*

The second axiom says, "Its touches of beauty should never be half-way, thereby making the reader breathless, instead of content. The rise, the progress, the setting of Imagery should, like the sun, shine over him, and set soberly, although in magnificence, leaving him in the luxury of twilight."

First, Keats gives us to understand that in poetry perfection of wording should be aimed at, because, otherwise, it will not be a pleasure to read poetry. Let me name his own ode *To Autumn* as an exemplification. Almost every touch in it is perfection itself. When we read it we feel things expressed there are as ripe to the core as the "season of mellow fruitfulness," which makes us utterly content. If, on the other hand, we read some of Browning's poems, say, *Sordello*, we are made rather breathless, because the touches of beauty are not finished and we are forced to grope, with painstaking study, after the meaning of this passage or that. Even the author of *Alastor*, *The Revolt of Islam*, and *The Cenci* ought, it seemed to Keats, to curb his magnanimity, and becoming less of an Ariel-like spirit, to "be more

¹ The italics are mine.

² On *Translating Homer*.

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of an artist, and load every rift of [his] subject with ore."¹ "The thought of such discipline," Keats went on in his letter to Shelley, "must fall like cold chains upon you, who perhaps never sat with your wings furled for six months together."² Though this advice to an elder poet seems rather audacious, it should not be forgotten that Shelley's later lyrics as well as *Julian and Maddalo*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and *Epipsychidion* were not published when this letter was written. In the younger poet's opinion, which I referred to from another point of view,³ "An artist must serve Mammon [another name for 'poetry and dramatic effort']; he must have 'self-concentration'—selfishness, perhaps." Shelley seemed then to write too carelessly and profusely.

Keats did not mean, however, to say that whatever is easily understood in poetry is the best thing. Far from it; but obscurity can be got rid of if the poet knows his art and spares no amount of effort at perfection. "The great beauty of poetry is that it makes everything, every place, interesting."⁴ Poetry should be a delight to the reader. When a hard mental task is imposed upon him, the glamour of poetry flies away, though it may be a source of pride to crack a hard nut.

Touches of beauty should be perfect. But perfect touches of beauty cannot always be obtained by lucidity and clarity. A faultless artist is frequently a clever, and not necessarily a great, artist. When

¹ To Shelley, August, 1820.

² To Shelley, August, 1820.

³ Cf. Chapter I., Section iv.

⁴ To G. Keats, 20th September, 1819.

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faultlessness is attained by studiousness and over-consciousness, imperfection is preferable where "there burns a truer light of God"¹ in the poet. Let us take two imperishable odes by Keats himself, namely, *To Autumn* and *To a Nightingale*. The former is one of the least faultless of all the English odes, while the latter is not without some faults. Still the *Nightingale* is *greater* than *Autumn*: it is intenser in mood, and has a life-giving power in a greater degree. It is this intensity that is most important in art. It makes Giotto, for instance, with all his imperfections, greater than almost any faultless painter in the culmination of the Renaissance. And similarly, in spite of all faults of taste and execution in his early works, Keats is a *greater* poet than Tennyson, who is unchallenged as a master of wording. "The excellence of every art is its intensity."² One of the most remarkable characteristics of Keats is certainly intensity of thought and feeling, which we noticed when we dealt with his selflessness and sympathy for others. Here is another illustration, with a comment on it, from a passage in his letter to Leigh Hunt (10 May, 1817), "I went to the Isle of Wight, thought so much about poetry, so long together, that I could not get to sleep at night; and, moreover, I know not how it was, I could not get wholesome food. By this means, in a week or so, I became not over-capable in my upper stories, and set off pell-mell for Margate, at least a hundred and fifty miles, because, for sooth, I fancied that I should like my old lodging here, and

¹ R. Browning: *Andrea del Sarto*.

² To G. and T. Keats, 28th December, 1817.

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could contrive to do without trees. Another thing, I was too much in solitude, and consequently obliged to be in continual burning of thought, as an only resource." And about his friend, Charles Dilke said that this is "an exact picture of the man's mind and character" and that "he could at any time have 'thought himself out' mind and body. Thought was intense with him, and seemed at times to assume a reality that influenced his conduct—and I have no doubt, helped to wear him out." "There was an awful warmth about my heart like a load of Immortality."¹ He had that sort of fire in his heart that would sacrifice everything he had for his friends.² "My mind is heap'd to the full"³; it was always so. He had wonderful concentration of mental energy, though intermittently, so that he could say, "It is an old maxim of mine . . . that every point of thought is the centre of an intellectual world,"⁴ and again, "I feel I can bear real ills better than imaginary ones."⁵ A mind of intensity like this cannot be a tamed tiger, which, having ceased to "burn bright in the forests of night," is contented to be a faultless pussy. Keats' best self-portrait is given in those immortal four lines of his sonnet on Chapman's Homer⁶: he is like one who stares with his eagle eyes,

"Silent, upon a peak in Darien."

His was, to modify the meaning of Dryden's words

¹ To Reynolds, 21st or 22nd September, 1818.

² See his letter to Haydon, 23rd December, 1818.

³ To Fanny Brawne, 16th August, 1819.

⁴ To Bailey, 13th March, 1818.

⁵ To G. Keats, 17th September, 1819.

⁶ Cf. p. 55, note 1, *supra*.

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which Fanny Brawne, after her marriage, misquoted in her letter to Thomas Medwin,

“A fiery soul, which working out its way,
Fretted the pigmy body to decay.”¹

The second half of this axiom illustrates how touches of beauty can be perfect in poetry. The word “imagery” which is used there seems to be in a wider sense than that of trope. Probably Keats means by it descriptive representation of ideas, or, more comprehensively, poetic idea in general. It should, he says, like the sun, come natural to the reader in its rising, shine over him in its circuit, and set soberly, although in magnificence, leaving him in the ease and pleasure of twilight. In other words, it should be spontaneous and inevitable when it comes, charm the reader with its magical power away from this actual life into the poetic world, and leave him there deeply impressed with inexhaustible associations of itself. When Keats says that it should “set soberly,² although in magnificence, leaving him in the luxury of twilight,” he discloses to us one of his chief characteristics, namely, his rich, his gorgeous imagination, in which he has hardly been surpassed by anyone except Shakespeare.³ Though he failed sometimes in his early works to make a wise selection of those prolific ideas that engrossed him one after the other, still he knew that poetic idea should come “naturally” and set “soberly.” He did not like any

¹ *Absalom and Achitophel*, I, 156f.

² Keats seems here to have, for a different purpose, borrowed some words from Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode*, *ad fin.*

³ Keats was so fond of the epithet “rich” that he daringly used it in that striking phrase “rich to die” (*Nightingale*, vi).

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violence in expression. Only he thought that poetry in her fullness should be at once tranquil and sumptuous.

This unobtrusive magnificence may be typified in his line,

“The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves,”¹

eves to the beauty of which ordinary people might not respond or be able, though moved by it, to write it in words. This line certainly leaves us in the luxury of twilight. Though Tennyson was much influenced by Keats and noted for his extremely precise nature-description, even he is short of the touch of beauty in this line quoted from the *Ode to a Nightingale*, when he wrote of a similar thing,

“And murmuring of innumerable bees.”²

In this well known line the Victorian poet, master of the onomatopœic art, is seen to be slavishly imitating the natural sound, while the Romantic master knows the boundary between art and nature and leaves us in the enchanted land of music. Another and mightier example of suggestion and concentration is found in the same ode by Keats,

“Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.”

Twenty pages might be written in interpretation of this wonder-working couplet—interpretation which would vary, according to the mood and culture of the exponent. Probably because he was formerly Keeper of the Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, Sir Sidney Colvin has always associated the

¹ *Ode to a Nightingale*, v.

² *The Princess*, vii.

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magic casements with the Enchanted Castle in Claude's painting ; probably because he was a Scotch scholar, the late Professor W. P. Ker suggested as a source of the couplet the legend of the fairy-mistress who lived in the castle of Goylen on its precipice above the sea ; and Lafcadio Hearn, romantic impressionist, probably following Leigh Hunt, interprets the lines in connection with mediæval stories about an imprisoned princess. Besides, those intimations there were probably in Keats' mind the following lines :

" Lady of the Mere,
Sole-sitting by the shores of old romance,"

one of the most Romantic verses in Wordsworth, never pointed out before in their kinship with Keats' scene of the magic casement. Such is the extraordinary richness of the impression made by Keats on the reader, that each of these interpretations may be of help in approaching the poet, who very likely fused all those sources and concentrated them with his poetic alchemy into those miraculous lines.

Other examples can easily be given from various poems by Keats :

" How tip-toe Night holds back her dark-grey hood." ¹

" Æaea's isle was wondering at the moon." ²

" There is a triple sight in blindness keen." ³

" Rich in the simple worship of a day." ⁴

" Those green-rob'd senators of mighty woods,
Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars." ⁵

¹ *Endymion*, I, 831.

² *Ibid.*, III, 415.

³ *Sonnet to Homer*, 12.

⁴ *Ode to Maia*, 14.

⁵ *Hyperion*, I, 73f.

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"And still they were the same bright, patient stars."¹

"The music, yearning like a God in pain."²

"Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep."³

"And great unerring Nature once seems wrong."⁴

"Awake for ever in a sweet unrest."⁵

In all of these quotations, which are "fine excesses," the impressions upon the reader will be as complete as the mellowness of twilight, with its barred clouds touching the stubble-plains with the rosy hue, its music borne aloft or sinking as the light wind lives or dies. The impression may be in some cases vague, but in all cases haunts the reader. Keats is surely one of the greatest masters of "potential speech"⁶ full of concentration and suggestion, who "load every rift of their subject with ore."

Potential speech expressed in condensation, which is similar to, but not identical with, concentration, is also found here and there in Keats' poetry, for example,

"His palace bright
Bastion'd with pyramids of glowing gold,
And touch'd with shade of bronzed obelisks,
Glar'd a blood-red through all its thousand courts,
Arches, and domes, and fiery galleries."⁷

¹ *Hyperion*, I, 353.

² *The Eve of St. Agnes*, vii.

³ *Ode to Psyche*, 54f.

⁴ *Lines to Fanny*, beginning "What can I do to drive away," 43.

⁵ "Bright Star," 12.

⁶ This admirable phrase is borrowed from Mr. A. Ransome, who classifies the language into kinetic and potential speeches; cf. his essay on the subject in *Portraits and Speculations*.

⁷ *Hyperion*, I, 176-180.

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"What I had seen
Of grey cathedrals, buttress'd walls, rent towers,
The superannuations of sunk realms,
Or Nature's rocks toil'd hard in waves and winds,
Seem'd but the faulture of decrepit things
To that eternal domed monument."¹

This type of achievement in potential speech dashes off the picture with a few strokes and gives us a bird's eye view of a vast range. In these swift strokes cannot be found such minute details as pre-Raphaelite painters took delight in. Keats was at need a master of both minute description and condensation, but as was mentioned elsewhere² it was always to the intensity of the imagination that he attached great importance. In many cases and under certain conditions, it is true, the fewer the details are, the greater is the effect on the reader. This is remarkably illustrated by Milton, the master of potential speech in condensation. And though Keats has sometimes been accused of vagueness of imagery, his poetry is resourceful in master strokes of visual images in words. So that, mentioning the sestet of the Leander sonnet, the quartet of *Chapman's Homer*, the passage beginning "Golden his hair" in *Hyperion* (II, 371), and the three lines about the woes of Troy in *Endymion* (II, 8-10), the present Poet Laureate says that "for its wealth in such rare strokes of descriptive imagination Keats' poetry must always take the very first rank."³

Potential speech of this kind, which leaves us in an abundance of impressions in a way different from

¹ *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 66-71.

² In Chapter I, iv and the early part of this section.

³ Critical Introduction to the Muses' Library: Keats, p. xciv.

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concentrated potential speech, recalls that school of pictorial art in Japan which is called "sumi-e" (Indian-ink picture), or black-and-white school. When an artist of that school drew a bamboo, he might only do it well in a few strokes. The function of art is not to make a copy of nature ; it is to re-create nature with the artist's imaginative power. Grasp the essential beauty of nature and express it on a canvas, and there is a work of art in colour. Re-create nature in words as few and suggestive as possible, and there is a work of art in language. Here I may refer, for illustration, to three Italian pictures, namely, Botticelli's *Spring* in the Uffizi, Florence, Beato Angelico's group of Angels, in San Marco of the same city, and the *Entombment* by Giotto, in the Capella dell' Arena, Padua. Nothing depicted in the first two paintings could be reproduced in more minute details, while bold and sublime touches in that fresco of the early Renaissance are extremely conspicuous. Of these masterpieces the *Spring* is far finer, but great in a less degree than the *Entombment*. Botticelli is a much more exquisite artist than Giotto, and yet there is not found in the later painter such grandeur as is characteristic of the earlier, while there is no question which of Giotto and Beato Angelico is greater. Minute description is by no means a necessary or sufficient condition of art. Or again, who has not heard of Frith's *Derby Day*, 1856, in the National Gallery, London (to mention a picture which is minuteness itself)? A museum of details, but from the point of view of pure art even ludicrous. Its impression on the spectator, at least on me, is based on its historical

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interest altogether apart from æsthetical persuasion. No work of art, whether in colour or in word, can leave us in the luxury of twilight unless it gives us something other than a secondary interest.

I may be laying too much stress on this aspect of poetic art. But as intensity, the parent of concentration and suggestion, is the most important thing in it, I may be allowed to go a little further. Neither fluency nor volubility is so essential an attribute as concentration and suggestion. In other words, without concentration and suggestion there can be no great speech. The most important business for a poet is to suggest what he wants to convey to the reader in concentrated potential speech. He should neither explain things for explanation's sake, nor argue for argument's sake. Though he may lack the intellectual power or the logical subtlety, it does not matter much if he can reveal, through his works, the infinite variety and maturity of human faculty. This being my conviction, as a lover of poetry, I am surprised to find an excess of the explanatory in European poetry. Let me take, as an example, the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, by one of the greatest English poets. Admitted that it is a great poem with many deeply suggestive lines which recall "the mighty waters rolling evermore," the poem could be shortened. While the whole work goes slowly, the passage addressed to the "best philosopher," the boy Hartley Coleridge, could be omitted, or reduced to a tenth of its length, without lessening the general effect. Intellectual imagination is valuable indeed, but there is a snare in it into which

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a poet is apt to be caught unless he speaks in imagery. Though in this ode Wordsworth speaks in imagery, it cannot be said about him that "out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star."¹ I do not mean to say that Wordsworth's poetry is seriously lengthy and tedious, but that he might have expressed his ideas in a more concentrated form, especially when writing long poems. He is only one example. An extreme instance of diffusion is the poem *Petra* by J. W. Burgon, which can be said, in spite of its length, to have only a single line (a famous one) that brightens its theme,

"A rose-red city—half as old as Time!"

Tennyson's *In Memoriam* could be reduced to a great degree; even Shakespeare's Sonnets seem sometimes verbose.

On the other hand, Japanese poetry as a whole may be an illustration of touches of beauty in concentration and suggestion. It is so extremely concise that it will often be, I am afraid, incomprehensible to the ordinary Western reader, and even repugnant to taste, accustomed to the orderly process of thought in poetry. The epigrammatic kind of Japanese poetry, which is called *hokku* or *haiku*, consisting of seventeen sounds,² is sometimes an enigma even for a Japanese. Still, when the key to it is found, it is nothing but an inexhaustible fountain of poetical associations. I may here quote a *hokku* in the original with a literal translation:

¹ R. Browning: *Abt Vogler*, vii.

² Japanese verse used to be scanned according to the number of sounds, and the number of sounds in a *hokku* is limited to seventeen, in an *uta* or *tanka* to thirty-one.

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"Komo wo kite,
Tarebito imasu,
Hana no haru."

"Covered in rush,
Who is it, there,
On this flowery Spring day?"

This was written by Basho in the seventeenth century. In those days beggars covered up in rush-mat worse than a rag were often seen in the street. Our poet saw one of those beggars and was deeply struck at the contrast between the wretchedness of that Tom o'Bedlam and the gaieties of people on their way to, or back from, cherry trees in full bloom, under which they amused themselves. That poor man might be a mere beggar, but more likely he might be, the poet wondered, Buddha himself appearing there as a mendicant friar. Why could he not be a follower of Buddha?

The same fertility of suggestions and associations concentrated in such a few words as a *hokku* can be found in Chinese poetry; for example,

"Pei jê i shan chin,
Hwang Ho ju hai liu;
Yü chiun ch'ien li mu,
Keng shang i ch'eng laou."

"The sun sets in behind the mount,
The Hwang Ho flows into the main;
Hoping to see thousands of miles away,
I climb another storey in the tower."

There is no traditional explanatory remark to this poem; but we can see in imagination the vast country of China, which can be compared to the vast domain of knowledge, and as the poet suggests to us, we are,

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in reading these lines, urged on and on, more intensely than ever, in our pursuit of truth and beauty. Generally speaking, in both Japanese and Chinese poetry, concentration and suggestion are all in all, so that words are extremely condensed. This has resulted in the poet's reluctance to write a long poem and the prevalence of short lyrics; consequently Japanese poetry lacks epics in a large scale, and the intellectual imagination in it is poor compared with its richness in the emotional imagination.¹ In the case of English poetry the reverse of this may be to some extent observed.

I have deviated from the main point, not without making it clear, I hope, that Keats is quite right when he says poetry should leave the reader "in the luxury of twilight," and I must now return to Keats himself. Keats "looked upon fine phrases like a lover."² His love of them was vivid even at a very early date of his life, and he never lost that fervour. When he borrowed Spenser's *Faerie Queene* from his friend, Charles Cowden Clarke, he was absorbed in reading it.³ I say "absorbed" because he was so fascinated by the verbal discoveries in that poem of romantic prodigality that "he *hoisted* himself up, and looked burly and dominant, as he said, 'What an image that is—*sea-shouldering whales!*'"⁴ Once he exclaimed "beautiful name, that Magdalen,"

¹ This great defect of Japanese poetry is realised by some contemporary poets, and such short poems as *uta* and *haikai* are now regarded as merely traditional forms of poetry, not suitable to express the complicated modern mind.

² To B. Bailey, 15th August, 1819.

³ Cf. p. 65.

⁴ C. C. Clarke, *Recollections of Writers*, p. 126.

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a beautiful name which inspired Henry Kingsley to write an exquisite lyric with it as title, probably the only poem worth remembering of all that were composed by the novelist. Next, on the word "vales" in *Paradise Lost*, I, 321, Keats commented, "There is a cool pleasure, in the very sound of vale. The English word is of the happiest chance. Milton has put vales in heaven and hell with the utter affection and yearning of a great Poet. It is a sort of Delphic Abstraction—a beautiful thing made more beautiful by being reflected and put in a Mist. The next mention of Vale is one of the most pathetic in the whole range of Poetry,

Others, more mild,
Retracted in a silent vale, etc.

How much of the charm is in the valley!" And in this way picking up fine phrases, one after another, Keats added some marginal notes to his copies of the Shakespeare Folio of 1808 and of *Paradise Lost*. Presumably he made each of those passages "food for a week's stroll in the summer"¹ and ruminated upon it as a thing "full of pleasures both sensual and spiritual," in which "the spiritual is felt when the very letters and points of characted language show like the hieroglyphics of beauty, the mysterious signs of our immortal free-masonry! 'A thing to dream of, not to tell!' The sensual life of verse springs warm from the lips of Kean, and to one learned in Shakespearian hieroglyphics—learned in the spiritual portion of those lines to which Kean adds a sensual grandeur, his tongue must seem to have robbed the Hybla bees

¹ To B. Bailey, 8th October, 1817.

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and left them honeyless.”¹ Keats’ proposal of a very pleasant life that one might pass is this: “Let him on a certain day read a certain page of full Poesy or distilled Prose, and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect upon it, and bring upon it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it, until it becomes stale—but when will it do so? Never. When Man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting-post towards all ‘the two-and-twenty Palaces.’”² Surely there is no better way of approaching to Poetry than this, and John Henry Newman tells us the same thing when he says, “Passages, which to a boy are but rhetorical commonplaces, neither better nor worse than a hundred others which any clever writer might supply, which he gets by heart and thinks very fine, and, imitates, as he thinks, successfully, in his flowing versification, at length come home to him, when long years have passed, and he has had experience of life, and pierce him, as if he had never before known them, with their sad earnestness and vivid exactness.”³

Now the question is whether Keats was a wise judge of phrases. Did he love only what was taken for granted as fine? No. He was neither so uncritical nor so lazy as to be contented with being a lover of ready-made collections of fine passages. He made up his mind never to take anything for granted—

¹ Keats: *On Edmund Kean as a Shakespearian Actor*. In this quotation the word “sensual,” which occurs three times, has the meaning of “sensuous.”

² To Reynolds, 19th February, 1818.

³ *Grammar of Assent*, I, iv.

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but, on the contrary, even to examine the truth of the commonest proverbs.¹ It is because he found them great for himself that he was under the influence of Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth. His was a mind always critical in reading, and independent of others' opinion. Think of his attitude towards Milton and Wordsworth, whom first he admired whole-heartedly and then severely criticised. Even as regards Coleridge and Shelley, he was not blind about their failures as poets. His well-known description of his meeting with Coleridge, the sage of Highgate, is even less reverential than the description of the latter's life given by Carlyle, the dissatisfied sage of Chelsea, while his only extant letter to Shelley shows him rather bluntly finding fault with his humanitarian brother poet. Above all, he was very severe upon himself. There are only two exceptions to his independence of judgment. One is his almost ridiculously pious attitude towards Shakespeare, when he declared that the three parts of *Henry VI* are "perfect works" and added, "We hate to say a word against a word of Shakespeare's."² The other is that he was, in his early days, incapable of standing clear of the unwholesome influence of the circumstances in which he was brought up, as well as his first "famous" friends; though later he was critical even about the very winning Leigh Hunt and called him "certainly a pleasant fellow in the main when you are with him—but, in reality, vain, egotistical and disgusting in matters of taste and in morals."³ When he cited from

¹ Cf. Keats' Letter to G. and G. Keats, 31st December, 1818.

² On Kean in "*Richard Duke of York*."

³ To G. and G. Keats, November, 1818.

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Shakespeare he usually chose unfamiliar passages, which is evidence of his critical ability ; those passages which he quoted from Shakespeare and Milton in his letters and commented on in his notes hardly need any vindication of their beauty.

From his own pages, therefore, I take some expressions in order to illustrate that he was not only a lover, but also a creator, of fine phrases in which every rift of the poet's subject is "loaded with ore." Keats had the power of embodying wonderful significance in his epithets : Witness, at random, "Venus' pearly bite," "blushing shut of day," "sunburnt mirth," "verdurous glooms," "rich to die," "soft-conched ear," "earnest stars," Asia's "dusky face," Greek poets' "old vigour," "alone and palely loitering," and so forth. Though Keats has left numerous quaint or queer expressions, especially in his early attempts, his gilding in word of pale streams with heavenly alchemy is everywhere in his poetry. It will be sufficient to comment on a single line, which is, since Leigh Hunt, dear to every lover of English poetry,

"And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon."¹

We can here not only watch the sparkle of "lucent syrops," but also taste it "tinct with cinnamon." One might say the line is triumphantly sensuous. Onomatopœia, melody, rhythm, and the associations of the words chosen tend together to give to the line a magic power, in spite of the use of the unusual adjunct "tinct" instead of the ordinary "tinctured," for which grammarians and precisian critics may blame

¹ *The Eve of St. Agnes*, xxv.

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the poet. Repeat the word "tinct," as probably Keats did in writing it, together with other words in the line, and you cannot fail to taste the flavour of the phrase. Here we have fine pleasures both spiritual and sensuous. They come all, I dare say it—from words. Keats was a great lover of words. He would bite words to bits, as Browning did bite flowers and leaves to bits in the impatience at being unable to possess them thoroughly, to see them completely, and to satiate himself with their scent.

This "lucent syrops" line is an example that shows Keats peculiarly in his element when he treated of what he called "luxuries," and yet he subordinated his power in that kind to his central greatness of discerning man's world of difficulties.

III. *Genuineness of Inspiration*

The first two axioms concerned what poetry should be to its reader; the third and last axiom seems to bear upon the poet's mode of writing poetry. It runs, "If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all."

Keats' mode of composition is described by his friend, Benjamin Bailey, with whom Keats stayed at Magdalen Hall, Oxford, in the late summer of 1817, when he was writing the third book of *Endymion*. "He sat down to his task—[in which Bailey's words], was about fifty lines a day—with his paper before him, and wrote with as much regularity, and apparently as much ease, as he wrote his letters. . . . Sometimes he fell short of his allotted task, but not often: and he would make it up another day. But he never

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forced himself.”¹ This is a very good substantiation of the third axiom, which hardly needs any explanation or proof. The point of importance in it is that no one can expect either spontaneity or inevitability from a poet who is not naturally moved to verses. This is amply illustrated by occasional poems, for instance, poems written on the occasion of coronations, marriages or the death of the author’s patron, which are usually doomed to be bad verses. Prize poems and even patriotic anthems are apt to be under the same unlucky star, because they are usually written with false inspiration. The poet should rather run away than write forced verses, as the boy-improvisator does who is the hero of a lovely poem by our contemporary, Mr. Robert Graves :

“He of his song then wearying ceased,
But was not yet released;
The Queen’s request was *More*,
And her behest was *More*.
He played of random notes some score,
He found his rhymes at least—
Then suddenly let his twangling harp down fall
And fled in tears from King and Queen and all.”

Cf. Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* (Koszul, p. 108). Can any poet be justified in saying, “*I will write a poem*”? The answer depends upon the circumstances. If the poet is thinking of the plot of a long epic, he may duly say, “*I will write it out some day.*” In writing longer poems as in building, will-power is also required. Even in the case of writing a short poem, will is sometimes a necessary condition, because

¹ Houghton MSS, cited by Colvin, pp. 143f.

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despondency, indolence or some other personal circumstances may prevent a man from seizing his opportunity, and he should endeavour to be up and doing, as Keats himself did. "Whenever I find myself growing vapourish, I rouse myself, wash, and put on a clean shirt, brush my hair and clothes, tie my shoestrings neatly, and in fact adonise as if I were going out. Then, all clean and comfortable I sit down to write. This I find the greatest relief."¹ In this manner, I suppose, he wrote fifty lines of *Endymion* every morning. And this is very good advice to everybody—poets and scholars. As one should have the will to believe, so the poet should have the will to write. Only he should never force himself; he should be patiently loyal to his inspiration and natural in his style.

Should poetry be written as soon as imagination comes in play, without thinking it over long and deeply? "An improving poet never becomes a great one," says Hazlitt, who is "one of the men who do not develop through a series of phases, but after an obscure incubation suddenly emerge complete."² This seems to be a clever saying applicable to some lyric poets. One may be reminded here of the well-known lines of Tennyson,

"I do but sing because I must,
And pipe but as the linnets sing."

The author of these two lines does not mean that he writes poetry without "thinking long and deeply"³ about his subject. Though these lines excellently

¹ Keats to his brother George, 17th September, 1819.

² Herford: *The Age of Wordsworth*, p. 76.

³ Wordsworth: Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*, 1802.

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present the poetic creed of inevitability and spontaneity, Tennyson cannot be said to have piped as the linnets sing. On the contrary, he is too often excessively elaborate, and in fact, *In Memoriam* is not a song which was sung so naturally and simply as he thought it was. What is true about him in these lines is that he expressed his sorrow because he felt it so keenly that he could not help writing about it. That is to say, in spite of his claim of spontaneity, Tennyson wrote that elegy after long and deep contemplation. And this was the case with Wordsworth, who said that poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity," and that our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discern what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till, at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sometimes, of such a nature, and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified."¹ Notwithstanding these ideals, Wordsworth not infrequently thought too much about his subject, so that over-studied rustic simplicities and dull reflexions are almost unbearable

¹ Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*, 1802.

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in his later works. After the composition of the *Immortality Ode* and the *Ode to Duty* he was at work, with a very few exceptions, on doggedly expanding and explaining what he had written before with true depth and glamour. As poetry did not come to the once great poet as naturally as the leaves come to a tree, it would have been better for him in his later years if he had not written so much as he did. This lack of genuine and natural inspiration in the later Wordsworth resulted in a deplorable monotony and triviality of subject, and didactic manner of treatment. Keats must have been forewarned of these lurking defects in the elder poet.

Next, did Keats himself never write poetry when he was not inspired? He was not at all infallible, and is known to have written wonderful lines and bad verses on the same day; he was at work in the morning at *The Cap and Bells*, while in the evening he revised *The Fall of Hyperion*. Poetic inspiration is one thing, and the inclination to writing poetry is another. One may be inclined for composition without being inspired, and naturalness of inclination may come in the likeness of genuineness of inspiration. In this way Keats was misguided and wrote doggerel, especially in his early days, without forcing himself. This false idea about genuineness of inspiration seems to have come to Keats mainly from the influence of Leigh Hunt, whose personality, "matchless as a fire-side companion," carried about him, even in verse, too much of the over-familiar parlour attitude. Ease, vivacity, a pretty topic or even grace of style cannot be an unmistakable sign that poetry came

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to the poet as naturally as the leaves to a tree. On the contrary, any of these qualities can easily be on the verge of simpering triviality. To be natural, poetry need not speak with such a familiar tone as Leigh Hunt in the "Rimini" days was delighted to write in. If Keats had known at the beginning of his poetic career that poetry of deep thought and passion comes as naturally as the leaves to a tree *when it comes* and that what is of importance is not familiarity, but sense of duty and sympathy for others, he would have been free from many faults of Cockneyism. By the time that he wrote these axioms, he had been largely emancipated from the yoke of those mannerisms, and he was so much more set upon thought and passion than on "luxury," that he said in connection with this last axiom, "However it may be with me, I cannot help looking into new countries with 'O for a muse of Fire to ascend!'"

For all his faults of Cockneyism, Keats knew that the polished artificiality and conventionalism of the pseudo-classical school were not to be called a natural result of poetic inspiration. Keats was angry with their affectation and forced mode of writing, when he deplored that those pseudo-classicists of the "schism nurtured by foppery and barbarism," as he thought,

"were closely wed
To musty laws lined out with wretched rule
And compass vile,"¹

and that they taught a school

¹ *Sleep and Poetry*, 194-196.

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“Of dolts to smooth, inlay, and clip, and fit,
Till, like the certain wands of Jacob's wit,
Their verses tallied.”¹

The ludicrous idea exasperated him, that rhetorical ingenuity is everything in literature, with its corollary that, if any craftsman in words can wear the mask of poetry no one can fail to be a poet. When in his later years he knew the difference between the fire-side tone and the true naturalness of writing, he uttered his final verdict about poetic composition :

“Who alive can say,
'Thou art no Poet—may'st not tell thy dreams?'
Since every man whose soul is not a clod
Hath visions and would speak, if he had loved,
And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.”²

Though Keats was not quite free from a taint of exaggeration in this utterance, the main purport is clearly seen. In poetry, he thought, it is vision that is of great importance, not the common inheritances of everybody you meet in the street—Keats probably knew this fact better than any other poet. If a poet is endowed with visions, words are to come whenever he wants them ; if, on the contrary, he is not gifted with visions and yet desires to write, he forces himself and produces no work of art.

As Keats argued that, unless poetry comes naturally, it had better not come at all, so he acted, and that seems to be one of the reasons why he did not finish so many poems of supreme beauty as the *Ode to Maia*, *The Eve of St. Mark*, *Hyperion*, and its recast. They were all begun with wonderful lines—and “there is always

¹ *Sleep and Poetry*, 197-199.

² *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 11-15.

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a great charm in the openings of great poems ”¹—but unfortunately circumstances prevented him from finishing them, and he did not force himself, though probably he could have continued, because he did not like to write poetry when it did not come naturally.

Of the reason why Keats left both *Hyperion* and its recast in a fragmentary state, much has been said not only by the author, but also by critics. According to his own statement, Keats became so worried about Miltonisms in his poems that he left them unfinished. Here it is to be noted that he was utterly under the spell of Milton when he was engaged on *Hyperion* (September or October, 1818—mid-January, 1819) and he became, for the first time, wary of the Miltonic touch after he had written *The Fall of Hyperion* (August-September, 1819).²

Keats believed that pure poetry should be written in spontaneous and inevitable words, and a true poet must observe the native quality of the mother tongue, that is, prefer the natural English way to the foreign manner of expression. In September 22nd, 1819, when he was putting aside *The Fall of Hyperion* as a fragment, Keats wrote to Reynolds that Chatterton “is the purest writer in the English language,” and added, “He has no French words.” The same opinion is also found in his letter to his brother

¹ Keats’ note on *Paradise Lost*.

² About the dates mentioned here, Keats’ letter has been consulted as the surest evidence, which was, for the first time, published by Miss Amy Lowell in *The John Keats Memorial Volume*, 1921. Keats wrote *The Fall of Hyperion* (the recast of *Hyperion*), while he was staying alone at Winchester, not after his return to Hampstead as mentioned in her *Life of Keats*.

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George, 21st September, 1819. Even so early as in 1817, in his rejected inscription to *Endymion*, Keats called this marvellous boy-poet "the most English of poets except Shakespeare." It is hardly needed to say that, so far as the pseudo-archaism in the *Rowley Poems*, except in "O sing unto my roundelay," "The Death of Sir Charles Bawdin," and some other pieces, is concerned, Chatterton's diction is not so pure as Keats thought. But as for its spontaneity and inevitability of diction, with the peculiar musical movement, Keats is quite right to call him characteristically English. This is more clearly understood when we come to Keats' contrast of Chatterton with Milton. "Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful, or rather, artistic humour."¹ "The *Paradise Lost*, though so fine in itself, is a corruption of our language. It should be kept as it is, unique, a curiosity, a beautiful and grand curiosity, the most remarkable production of the world; a northern dialect accommodating itself to Greek and Latin inversions and intonations. . . . Chatterton's language is entirely northern. I prefer the native music of it to Milton's, cut by feet."² It is by no means surprising that this opinion should come from a poet like Keats, who, with small Latin and less Greek in him, had none of the ardour for foreign idioms that Milton, the classical scholar, amply had, and that by the latter half of September, 1819, he was on his guard against Milton, because, as he said, "Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse

¹ To J. H. Reynolds, 22nd September, 1819.

² To George Keats, 21st September, 1819.

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cannot be written, but is the verse of art. I wish to devote myself to another verse alone.”¹

Why did this idea occur to him so unexpectedly? It was only four weeks since he had said that the *Paradise Lost* had every day become a greater wonder to him. Milton must have then seemed to him as surpassing Wordsworth, whom in the previous year he had thought deeper from the humanitarian point of view than the poet of *Paradise Lost*. The greater wonder Milton became, the greater influence he must have had on Keats. And it should be remembered that this influence came to the Romantic poet when he was recasting *Hyperion*, which was left in the form of a fragment seven or eight months before. This is the reason why there are more Miltonisms in the recast than in the first version, so that even Professor E. de Sélincourt notices with perplexity that “if many Miltonisms are removed many are retained, and even new ones introduced.”² It was not Keats’ intention in recasting the poem to become free from Miltonic Latinism. When this influence was realised as incongruous with his genius, it suddenly became so unbearable to the independent Keats, that standing on his guard against Milton he precipitously rejected it. He still felt that *Paradise Lost* is a great poem, but he was unwilling to imitate it. As Milton had his own style, so Keats had his own, and no poet can write anything genuine unless he is true to himself. He now wished to devote himself

¹ To George Keats, 21st September, 1819.

² See the excellent edition of Keats (p. 519) by this authority on these fragmentary epics.

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wholly to the verse native to his genius and independent of the Miltonic. But there were at that time things in his life which hindered him from beginning a new work: his love passion for Fanny Brawne became unbearable; his fatal disease and his brother's misfortunes in America made him live like a hermit in the midst of the world, and his sympathies were deeply hurt with the quarrels of his old friends. All these unfavourable circumstances coming "in battalions" were powerful enough to embitter his judgment on the faults of his recast of *Hyperion*. And this bitter self-criticism prevented poetry from coming to him as naturally as the leaves come to a tree. This is, I think, the main reason why the poem is left unfinished, though it assures us of the promise of its author better than any other work by him.

The explanation is before the reader; it is not a sign of the decline of Keats' creative power that he left *The Fall of Hyperion* in the state of a fragment. It is true he did not write any great new work in "another verse." But he was not such a poet as would cry,

"My genial spirits fail,"

or,

"I could lie down like a tired child,
And weep away the life of care."

Though he was not free, even in his last years, from "lowness of spirits," he was always conscious of his gift as a poet, while his greatest elevation of soul, as he said in a letter,¹ left him every time more humble.

¹ See a paragraph near the end of Keats' letter to his brother and sister-in-law, October, 1818.

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And the fact that he felt he was greater than he knew is a sign that there was always in him much of creative impulse; that he was great in reality, and could have produced great works if only he had lived longer.

iv. *Keats' Position in English Poetry*

In conclusion, though Keats was a poet of almost excessive sensuousness, delighting in imaginative intuition and discarding logical inference, he attached such great importance to reality that he believed in the identity of beauty and reality. It was this spirit of reality that called his attention to life and made him sympathize with men and women. Hence his humanitarian and even neo-idealistic notion about the function of poetry, which can easily be traced in his important works in verse and prose. He was a true "poet" in contrast with a "dreamer," and instinctively knew what is most vital in poetry; for example, concentration and suggestion, which he called "fine excess," spontaneity and inevitability, and genuineness of inspiration. It may not be useless to say a few words about the position of this wonderful poet in the history of English poetry.

Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth can be mentioned as poets who influenced Keats in shaping his idea of the function of poetry. The first of these masters gave him the earliest and most definite stimulus, and, to borrow his friend C. A. Brown's words, "in Spenser's fairy land he was enchanted, breathed in a new world and became a new being, till enamoured of the stanza, he attempted

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to imitate it and succeeded." Though this "poets' poet" had to the full the luxuriance of romantic fancy and detail, the rich exuberance and easy grace of expression, there is also a noble ethical temper in his poetry. Spenser's intention in writing his most ambitious work was, as he told Sir Walter Raleigh, "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline," and the Puritan Milton dared to be known to think him a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas. To these Puritans poetry was more than a delightful ghost which lures the reader away from this wretched world to a dreamland of romance and natural magic. But it is to be remembered that there is in Spenser's fairyland a lamentable, though sweet, absence of real and breathing humanity and of heartfelt sympathy for the miseries of this world. Even in Milton, who though having "an exquisite sense of ease and pleasure, poetical Luxury . . . devoted himself rather to the ardours than the pleasures of Song"¹—even in this Puritan, I am afraid, there is not enough of the spirit of "self-destroying" for other individuals. In spite of his deep sense of the duty of holiness, obedience and service, as well as his profound compassion for "the giant agony of the world" and his deep-rooted party spirit, he seems not to have "laboured for mortal good," like a "slave to poor humanity." In Keats' opinion as we gathered, poets should be utterly devoted to doing good for others by means of their writings, and there should not be, in an ideal poet, even a taint of "that last infirmity of noble mind" if it is stained with egotism.

Keats' notes on *Paradise Lost*.

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Nevertheless, Keats knew that there is in Milton something grand, on account of which he can be mentioned in one breath with Shakespeare. "Shakespeare and the *Paradise Lost* every day become greater wonders to me."¹ The writer of that statement was once so delighted to have a portrait of the greatest of dramatists given him by his old landlady in the Isle of Wight that he regarded it as his presiding genius and reflected, "Shakespeare is enough for us."² He read him again and again, so much that in his published writings there are, as far as I know, more than sixty allusions to, and quotations from, the dramatist. One day, dividing things into three heads—things real, things semi-real and nothings—Keats mentions existences of Sun, Moon and Stars, and passages of Shakespeare as things real.³ And the myriad-minded poet is, one might say, a universe himself; so wide and deep is his sympathy for and with men and women. Consequently he seemed to Keats at one time "the only lonely and perfectly happy creature God ever formed"⁴ and at another "a miserable and mighty poet of the human heart."⁵ Shakespeare was, early and late in Keats' life, the chief of the guardian angels under whose guidance he put his genius to school.

As for Wordsworth, in one of some thirty references to him (the greatest number except in Shakespeare's case), Keats compares him with his prototype in part, saying, "And here I have nothing but surmises, from

¹ To Bailey, 15th August, 1819.

² To Haydon, 11th May, 1817.

³ To Bailey, 13th May, 1818.

⁴ On Kean in "*Richard Duke of York*."

⁵ To Miss Jeffrey, 9th June, 1819.

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an uncertainty whether Milton's apparently less anxiety for humanity proceeds from his seeing further or not than Wordsworth: and whether Wordsworth has in truth epic passion, and martyrs himself to the human heart, the main region of his song."¹ Another passage in the same letter, which is the key to the meaning of *Sleep and Poetry*, lines 101-162, is, as the present Poet Laureate pointed out, identical in its main purport with that of Wordsworth's *Lines, Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*. The passages of the two poets are too well known to be quoted here. Describing human life in a simile, as far as he perceives it at that date, Keats goes on to say that, though he must take into account "the general and gregarious advance of intellect," he should think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton because the Puritan poet "did not think into the human heart as Wordsworth has done." Those lines about the "usurpers" of the height of Poetry, in *The Fall of Hyperion*, written some seventeen months later than this letter to Reynolds, harmonise with a passage in Wordsworth's poem published for the first time in 1888:

"Such grateful haunts foregoing, if I oft
Must turn elsewhere—to travel near the tribes
And fellowship of Men, and see ill sights
Of madding passions mutually inflamed;
Must hear Humanity in fields and groves
Pipe solitary anguish; or must hang
Brooding above the fierce confederate storm
Of sorrow, barricaded evermore
Within the walls of cities . . ."²

¹ To Reynolds, 3rd May, 1818.

² *The Recluse*, I, i, 725-733.

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Though in Shelley's well-known lines,

"Me—who am as a nerve o'er which do creep
The else unfelt oppressions of this earth,"¹

a similar spirit is eloquent, *Julian and Maddalo* was published two years later than Keats' death. A few lines in Shelley's last poem, that noble *Triumph of Life*, in which the author is bidden :

"From spectator turn
Actor or victim in this wretchedness,
And what thou wouldst be taught I then may learn
From thee,"²

suggest that Shelley can be said to have been approaching the position of Keats in *The Fall of Hyperion*.

Keats descried the main features of his view of poetry when he was twenty-one, and gave it the final expression when twenty-four. Is there any poet, one may ask, who thought so deeply about his mission when so young as Keats ?

Moreover, Keats surpassed contemporary poets in respect of neo-idealistic views of life and poetry. Though his poetry is, in a sense, the culminating point of English Romanticism, he was not contented with the Romantic view of life. It is hardly necessary to remark that most of the Romantic poets attempted to heal the world. Wordsworth had a healing power ; Coleridge was a philosopher, statesman (without portfolio) and sage ; Byron pointed out what he thought English cant ; Shelley sang of reforms and revolutions. They were all critics of life in their own ways. But their mode of thinking was too

¹ *Julian and Maddalo*, 449f.

² Ll. 305-307.

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subjective, and consequently their idea of life lacked application. Keats, on the contrary, tried, as some later writers did, to see things as they really are:

"To bear all naked truths,
And to envisage circumstance, all calm,
That is the top of sovereignty."

This is neither sugared idealism nor "a bellows unto ire," nor a dream of utopias. This is to discern what are really good and evil both in oneself and others with almost Stoical calmness, and to spare no pains for the realisation of one's ideals. In this respect, Keats made a greater advance than other Romanticists and had in him something of the later-nineteenth-century Naturalist point of view. And thus combining in himself both idealism and realism, he can be named as a precursor of the twentieth-century Neo-Idealists. The pity of it is that he did not reach even the age when Shakespeare began to write, and could not leave any great achievements that unmistakably qualify him as a Neo-Idealist poet.

Other Romanticists, in their endeavour to put the world right, contemplated some enchanting and "dim-discovered" lands as their ideal state of society,¹ but finding, to their disappointment, so many evils and sins in this actual life, thought themselves "most wretched men . . . cradled into poetry by wrong,"² and became either "large self-worshippers,"³ or

¹ Cf. Chapter I, Section 1, above.

² *Julian and Maddalo*, 544f.

³ *The Fall of Hyperion* I, 207; cf. "I am afraid Wordsworth went rather huff'd out of Town—I am sorry for it—he cannot expect his fireside Divan to be infallible—he cannot expect but that every man of worth is as proud as himself" (Keats to Haydon, 10th April, 1818).

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"careless Hectorers,"¹ or lyrist who "lie down like a child and weep away the life of care."² Thus

"the dreamer venoms all his days
Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve,"³

because they lack the sense of reality. The dreamer-poet vexes the world, and the true poet pours out a balm upon it. Very diffidently Keats confesses that he is still a dreamer, saying,

"That I am none I feel, as vultures feel
They are no birds when eagles are abroad."

When he indignantly says,

"Though I breathe death with them it will be life
To see them sprawl before me into graves,"

he means only to utter his hatred of, and "a Pythia's spleen" against, the dreamers who are antipodes to the poets. In these lines as well as in the five lines preceding them, Keats is thinking of only the weak points of his contemporaries, their strong points being for the moment out of sight because of his extreme eagerness to mark the distinction of the poet and the dreamer.

Let it be remembered, further, that Keats, in spite of his "horrid morbidity of temperament" and of self-depression, did not usually mourn forth a melancholy lament for the fading glory and strength of youth, while Shelley was, though so young, often grieving,

¹ *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 208. Having Byron in his mind Keats speaks of "Strange thunders from the potency of song," and again of "ugly clubs, the poets Polyphemes disturbing the grand sea" (*Sleep and Poetry*, 231 and 234-236).

² Shelley: *Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples*.

³ *The Fall of Hyperion*, II, 175f.

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"I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire."¹

Certainly Keats had in him a vein of "flint and iron." He thought that "difficulties nerve the spirit of man," and was by his pain enabled "to look with an obstinate eye on the Devil himself,"² convinced that he had in him "that which will bear the buffets of the world."³ Thinking that it would be the finest thing to strengthen the energies of mind, he says, "To be thrown among people who care not for you, with whom you have no sympathies, forces the mind upon its own resources, and leaves it free to make its speculations of the differences of human character and to class them with the calmness of a botanist."⁴ "My hopes are ever paramount to despairs."⁵ In spite of Carlyle's blasphemous contempt and Mr. George Moore's feline rancour, there is much of manly soundness in Keats, and it is this quality that makes him form his humanitarian view about the function of poetry.

When I said in an earlier paragraph that Keats is, in a sense, the culminating point of the English Romantic poets, even those who whole-heartedly recognise him as one of the pinnacles in Romantic poetry may hesitate to go so far. By the culminating point I mean the fact that almost all the Romantic elements are found in him as if he were the focus of the genius of his period. Wordsworth's passion for Nature and reverence for the dignity of individual

¹ *Epipsychidion*, 590.

² To Haydon, 10th May, 1817.

³ To G. and G. Keats, 19th March, 1819.

⁴ To Miss Jeffrey, 9th June, 1819.

⁵ To G. Keats, 18th September, 1819.

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personality, Coleridge's far-travelling mysticism and mediævalism, Scott's historical interest, Byron's exoticism and hate of cant, Shelley's enthusiasm for the reform of the world and even his pursuit of "intellectual beauty," besides the revolutionary spirit against convention and servitude, a spirit which was common to most of them—all these characteristics of Romantic poets are more or less prominent in the youngest Romantic poet. It is unnecessary to emphasise that Keats is in some aspects surpassed by others. For example, he is no equal with Wordsworth in communion with Nature ; inferior to Shelley in ethereal vision and "lyrical cry" ; no rival of Byron in wide outlook of actual life, not to mention the comparatively small quantity of his works. Still, his glory is that all important factors of Romanticism are gathered together in him. Moreover, he is second to none of the Romantic poets in his love of beauty expressed in art, especially sculpture and painting. His is, in fact, the subtlest sense of beauty among all the poets in the early half of the nineteenth century. Above all, he is more advanced than any of those poets in his view of poetry in relation to life, the interpretation of which has been the motive of this essay.

Though, from the point of view of the recent trend of thought about poetry and life, Keats' conception of poetry is a most interesting subject, it was not the point to which early critics paid much attention. The fame of Keats was long based on his sensuous poetry. Though his influence is clearly seen in the early poems by Tennyson, it is the "luxuries," and

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not the grand style, of Keats that inhabit there. One can note a similarity in the two poets' views about the function of poetry, and yet when the Victorian poet-laureate deals with it, he becomes didactic. While the tone of *The Fall of Hyperion* conveys a high morality, we are too deeply impressed by its poetic quality to suspect moralisation; on the contrary, while we know *The Palace of Art* is replete with gorgeous beauty, we cannot but be aware of its strangely repellent didacticism. These two poems contain a similar teaching of the artistic attitude towards life, and yet the impressions they give to us are greatly contrasted.

Moreover, the sincerity of Keats as a poet and man was not much recognised by Victorian poets, whose morality was, with a few exceptions, based on conventional codes. R. Browning may have, though not clearly, realised the moral significance of Keats' poetry, when he ranked him with Zoroaster, Galileo and Homer, saying,

“Dumb to Homer, dumb to Keats—him, even!”¹

D. G. Rossetti was a great admirer of Keats' tales in verse, and there are many passages in his poetry that recall the sensuousness of the master-poet; still one may wonder how deeply he appreciated *The Fall of Hyperion*. *Sleep and Poetry* was unduly neglected by early readers in spite of its importance as the first manifesto of Keats' view of poetry. It may be that F. M. Owen and William Morris were the discoverers of the humanitarian idealist in Keats.

¹ *One Word More*, xxi.

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When the Kelmscott Press Keats was being printed under his supervision, Morris remarked that "*La Belle Dame sans Merci* was the germ from which all the poetry of his group had sprung," and yet he realised another and more serious aspect of Keats' work. It was Morris who quoted before G. B. Shaw a passage of *Isabella* in relation to capitalism and labour. In his lecture, *Art under Plutocracy*, delivered at University College, Oxford, 14 November, 1883, with John Ruskin in the chair, Morris cited the following lines from *Isabella*, xv,

"for them alone did seethe
A thousand men in troubles wide and dark :
Half-ignorant, they turn'd an easy wheel,
That set sharp racks at work, to pinch and peel " ;

saying towards the end of the lecture, "I cannot help hoping that there are some here who are already in dread of the shadow of that degradation of consciously sustaining an injustice, and are eager to escape from that half-ignorant tyranny of which Keats tells, and which is, sooth to say, the common condition of rich people." Morris was correct in this restrained comment, while Mr. Shaw, in his emphasis on Keats the humanitarian, forgets Keats the artist.¹

The greatness of Keats, as has been remarked above, does not lie so much in his sensuous poetry as in his Neo-Idealistic poetry and view of life, his conviction expressed in poems and letters that greatness comes through "bearing all naked truths" and suffering for others. Nobody will be surprised to find now a greater number of more ardent admirers

¹ Cf. p. 82, note 2, above.

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of Keats among poets and critics than before the War. Though it is impossible to agree with some critics in saying that Keats is surpassed by none except Shakespeare, it is unnecessary to suggest, with Sir Sidney Colvin, that the new world after the War requires poetry which is more real and vigorous than that by Keats.

When I bent before the grave where lies one who thought his "name was writ in water," and where I could not help visiting as often as possible during my two weeks' stay in Rome, there occurred to me the prophecy that Thomas Hardy would have heard if he had but lived early in the Nineteenth Century :

"Good. That man goes to Rome—to death, despair ;
And no one notes him now but you and I :
A hundred years, and the world will follow him there,
And bend with reverence where his ashes lie."

Now in our view of poetry we follow Keats, and I hope my pilgrimage was not a mere sentimental journey along the King's highway.

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